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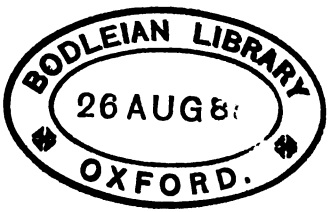

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TO

ADRIENNE,

WHOSE HAND WAS THE FIRST HELD OUT TO ME

IN FELLOWSHIP ON THIS SIDE THE ATLANTIC,

I DEDICATE THIS STORY.

NEW YORK,

May, 1885.

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THE HEIR PRESUMPTIVE.

A LOVE STORY.

CHAPTER I.

"AFTER THOUGHTS."

GLADYS breaks from him and stumbles up the path that leads towards her home, half-blind, half-giddy, and hardly understanding the importance of the step she has pledged herself to take.

Before she enters the shrubbery which will conceal her from his view, she turns to wave a trembling farewell to her lover. There he stands, just where she left him, gazing after her in mute adoration. He looks so young, so handsome, so earnest, so much all that a man and a lover should

be, that something suddenly rises in Gladys' heart—some undefinable fear of loss—some shadow of the unutterable future—that makes her feel as if this were their last meeting, instead of the commencement of a life of love. With a cry of mingled pain and passion, she retraces her steps, and flies back to the arms that are stretched out to receive her.

"I could not go!" she sobs vehemently. "I could not go without one last kiss, Jemmie."

He laughs at her for a silly girl, and gives her what she asks for, and sends her on her way again, tranquillised, but with a heart full of indecision.

She reaches Carronby House, and creeps up to her dressing-room as if she were afraid to meet even a servant, who might read and interpret the unusual expression of her face. As she gains her sanctuary and locks the door behind her, she sinks

down in an arm-chair before the fire, and clasping her hands upon her forehead, tries to think coherently over what she has done. She has promised Jemmie—ah, how she loves him!—she has promised him—has she not?—to leave Carronby to-morrow, and go away for ever, and live with him as—as—yes, she supposes that after a little while, she will be his wife! And as she thinks so—dearly as she loves him—Lady Mountcarron heaves a deep sigh.

Well, after all, it is for the best. One thing is certain, she can never be happy without Jemmie—he is all the world to her—and between two evils it is best to choose the least! At this juncture Gladys opens her eyes and lets them rove listlessly about the appointments of her dressing-chamber. How very beautiful they are! It seems as though she had never noticed their costliness before. The room is panelled in pale pink and white,

and all the furniture has been made to correspond. Her toilette table, with its draperies of lace over pink satin, its oval French mirror, garlanded with Cupids and flowers, its wealth of ivory and silver and cut-glass, never appeared so pretty in her eyes as it does now. She has taken it all as a matter of course, as a necessary appendage to her wealth and station; but for the first time it seems to strike her that Mountcarron must have had a voice in the adornment of her rooms, that it must at least have been by his orders, that so much trouble was taken to decorate them for her use.

Gladys removes her walking things and throws them on one side, then sinks down into her luxurious seat again, and tries to collect her wandering thoughts. But she cannot. Her brain is on fire. Her mind is in a tangle. The only idea that she can grasp at and realise is that she has promised Jemmie that she will leave

Carronby House to morrow, and never come back to it again.

She rises from her chair and pushes her fair curls back from her forehead, and paces up and down the room like a restless animal. It seemed so natural, so easy, whilst she was standing there, with Jemmie's arms around her, and his dear eyes gazing into hers, and his lips——

Ah, yes; it it all right. It must be so. There is no alternative. She could not live one day, and know that her boy had gone from her for ever.

Her maid is heard at this moment applying for admittance, and Gladys unlocks the door and lets her in.

"I'm sure I beg your ladyship's pardon." exclaims the woman, "but I didn't know as your ladyship had come in. I only stepped up to see after the fire. Will your ladyship dress for dinner now, or shall I wait until your ladyship rings?"

"No, Watson! I will dress at once. It

is nearly six o'clock. Give me something plain and warm, please. We are alone, to night."

"I am afraid as your ladyship is shivering," says the woman; "I hope as your ladyship has not taken cold."

"I don't think I have, but it was very chilly this afternoon, and these spring days are treacherous."

"That they are, your ladyship, and it is never safe for your ladyship to leave off your furs till after April. How will your ladyship please to have your hair done?"

"Any way, Watson—any way, only be quick about it. I think I *must* have taken a little cold, for I don't feel quite well this evening."

"Shall I ring for a cup of tea, or a glass of wine, for your ladyship?"

"No, thank you. Only dress me, and leave me to myself."

The servant is quiet after this, and Gladys resigns herself again to thought. The

repetition of her title annoys, and makes her fractious—she cannot tell why. It has never worried her before, but to-night it seems as if, each time it is spoken, it strikes upon her brain like a blow from a hammer.

Her maid arrays her in a high, black velvet dress, relieved at the throat and wrists by ruffles of old lace, and in which she looks as if she had stepped out of a picture-frame.

Once more alone, Gladys finds herself wondering, in a vague manner, if she shall take that dress with her—indeed, which dresses of all her wardrobe, she shall take with her—tries to recall which of her costumes Jemmie has expressed approval of, and admired her in most, and then smiles at her folly, as she remembers she is not likely to be obliged to consider any such trivialities in the future.

"Jemmie likes me in anything," she

thinks, "and I suppose he has plenty of money to supply all my wants."

But the doubt sets her pondering. *Has* Mr. Brooke plenty of money for them both? She has never thought of inquiring the amount of his income. It has been no business of hers to do so. But she feels sure—*almost* sure, that is to say—that if he had not a sufficiency, he would never have asked her to cast in her lot with his. Not but what she believed she could bear, even poverty, with Jemmie. She is quite sure that no riches could make her happy, apart from him. Still, she has never been accustomed to stint herself or economise in any way. Even in her father's house—although General and Mrs. Fuller are not wealthy—the question of money was never raised in the hearing of the children. But as the remembrance of her old home passes through Gladys' mind, she rises hurriedly from her seat and walks downstairs to the drawing-room. It is close upon seven. Mount-

carron cannot be long, now; she will beguile the time to dinner by playing on the piano. She is running rapidly through waltzes and galops, when her husband, clad in frieze and gaiters, with mud-splashed boots, pops his head into the open doorway.

"Ready for dinner, my dear? All right! I won't keep you waiting a minute. Been detained by a confounded cow. Tell you all about it by and by," and disappears again.

At another time, Lady Mountcarron would have felt inclined to turn up the tip of her pretty nose at this unauthorised invasion of her particular precincts.

"Mountcarron and mud again," she would have said to Jemmie (had Jemmie been by) "the two are never disassociated in my mind."

But, with the strange contrariety of human nature, to-day, of all days, Gladys does not feel inclined to sneer at the earl's appearance. On the contrary, it strikes

her as being rather manly and suitable—certainly more suitable for a country gentleman, than a dandified costume only fit for Bond Street and Piccadilly. Of course, he cannot compare with Jemmie (at the thought of whom her eyes glisten, and her hands unconsciously glide into the dreamy measure of a plaintive waltz), but still, he is a very good-looking man, and some women might call him handsome. During the meal that follows, too, Lord Mountcarron is more attentive to his wife than usual. He does not often trouble himself about her looks, but to-night he observes that she is pale, and makes her take a glass of his oldest Madeira—recommends to her notice the lamb chops that are placed before him—and tells her the violets she wears in her bosom are as sweet as herself. Gladys is bound to listen to the whole history of the "confounded cow." The price the earl paid for her—the stock from which she came—and the diseases she developed as

soon as the bargain was concluded. She hears it all without hearing it. She is too much agitated to be able to understand what is said to her. All she is thankful for is, that Jemmie's name is not mentioned between them. But at last that comes too. The cow being disposed of, the earl's thoughts turn to his cousin.

"What's Jem about, I wonder," he says, "that he has not been over to see us for so long? Have you met him lately, Gladys?"

"Yes! Mountcarron. I was over at Nutley this afternoon. I went to lunch with Elinor. They are all quite well."

"And did that beggar, Jem, say when he was coming over to Carronby?"

"I did not hear him mention any time."

"By Jove! he must be up to something. He must have fallen in love, and gone courting. Who is it likely to be, Gladys? The fair Miss Rusherton, or one of the Vicar's daughters.

"I don't know," replies Gladys, blushing scarlet, as she bends over her dessert.

As she leaves him to his wine and a cigar, and passes him, on her way back to the drawing-room, the earl catches her by the hand and detains her.

"You won't let her be anything but plain 'Mrs. Brooke,' whoever she may be, will you?" he says, returning to the subject of his cousin. "You must keep Jem out of the title, Gladys, or I'll never forgive you."

She laughs nervously, and escapes from his grasp, but the words he has uttered ring in her ears. "*Plain Mrs. Brooke.*"

She has never thought of it before. She has never contemplated the possibility of her taking Jemmie's name, but that is, of course, what she must eventually do. *Plain* "*Mrs. Brooke.*"

And she, who has always flouted the idea of being plain Mrs. Anybody—who has despised the class of commoners from which she sprang—who worked so hard to obtain

a title, and a position amongst the aristocracy—is it possible that all her labour and all her sacrifice is to be cast on one side, in exchange for—What?

Shame—obscurity—ostracism from the world she so much loves—and *if* all goes right, and she becomes Jemmie's lawful wife at last, the name of *Mrs. Brooke*—Gladys cannot bear it. The love and the bliss all seem to disappear beneath the weight of this misfortune. To give up her title! To be no longer a Countess! To resign the wealth—the luxury—for which she sold herself, to let it go for nought—for less than nought—to exchange it for a life-long disgrace! And she has not even been presented at Court yet—she has not passed through her first season as the Countess of Mountcarron. She has not gathered even the first-fruits of her skilful husbandry. As she remembers it, she casts herself upon the sofa, and gives way to silent tears. She is roused at her hus-

band putting his head in again at the door.

"Are you asleep, Gladys? I only looked in to tell you Captain Bainbridge has come round to ask me to play a game of billiards with him; so we're off for the evening. You'd better go to bed, my dear. You're looking very tired, and there's nothing to keep you up. Good night!"

"Good night," she echoes feebly, from the sofa cushions; "I will take your advice, Mountcarron, and go to bed. I have a dreadful headache."

She waits till the earl has disappeared, and then she drags herself up-stairs, and throws herself down upon her bed, just as she is, and tries to remember what she has done—to what she has condemned herself!

Is it possible she can have been mad enough to promise Jemmie to give up everything—positively *everything*—and go away with him?

Oh no! no! She cannot have known

what she was saying—it was not fair of him to ask her—he would be as sorry as herself, directly it was over! And, *then*, there would be no possibility of recall! Everything would be over for them both—for ever and for ever!

And yet, though Lady Mountcarron can reason thus, when brought face to face, and in solitude, with the rashness of which she has been guilty, she spoke the truth when she told James Brooke she loved him! She *does* love him, fondly and passionately. He has stirred a depth in her nature which she did not know that she possessed. He has shewn her that she has a heart—he has, in fact, taught her, and for the first time in her life, how to love. But the defects of the education bestowed on Gladys by her worldly-minded mother, are very great, and still hold sway over her. Love has broken through the crust of her greed, but it has not dispersed it. The fascination of Jemmie's presence makes her forget

everything but himself; but when he is away, her love of rank and power, and the world's good opinion, rise uppermost. She is at once a worse and a better woman for this creed. Without it, her nature would assert itself, and leave her honest, if impure. With it, she is provided with a defence against the world, but not against the false atmosphere in which she is content to dwell. She is nearly beside herself with fear and longing and indecision, when she catches sight of her father's photograph, and the fact decides her fate. Gladys is really fond of her father. He is the only living creature, beside Mr. Brooke, who has a decided hold upon her heart. Yet her passion for the younger man would have turned the scale in his favour, however deeply her father might have felt the blow of her dishonour, had not the weight of her position as a Countess been added to that of her virtue. But where our affections clash with our interests, we are all apt to

let a very small addition turn the balance in the favour of the world. Lady Mountcarron, before the sudden sight of General Fuller's portrait brings the idea of his probable unhappiness vividly to her mind, believed it impossible for her to break the promise she had made to Mr. Brooke.

She did not exactly regret it, but the worst consequences of such an act stared her blankly in the face. She was miserable at the idea of giving her lover up, but she was still more miserable at the idea of keeping faith with him. And yet she had no possible excuse to make for breaking her word. She *could* not say—indeed, she would hardly confess to herself—that her love for him was so poor a thing as to be outbalanced by a coronet and a fortune.

But when she remembers how miserable her father will be at her desertion of them —how her mother will be ashamed to look their acquaintances in the face, and the disgrace she brings upon them will be re-

flected upon Winnie and her children, then Lady Mountcarron feels strong enough to battle with her fate. She is not *really* stronger. She does not despise vice, nor value virtue more than she did when she clung to Jemmie on the Lovers' Seat. But she has found something to fight with—a weapon to use against his arguments, wherewith to ward off his reproaches—a trusty, unassailable weapon—one which can only bring her credit to wield—her father's shame!

When Gladys has decided thus, she seizes General Fuller's portrait, and blisters it with her tears.

"My dear, darling old dad!" she cries, "how could I have been so cruel as to forget you, even for a moment? To forget how anxious you always are about me—how much you love your girl! What a fearful blow it would be to you never to see me more. My poor, darling, patient dad"—kissing the cardboard vehemently—

"I know you have had so much trouble in your lifetime. How could I have dreamt of giving you more? What *would* you have said—oh, what *would* you have said—if a letter had reached you with the news that I had gone away for ever, and was no longer a countess, and had brought shame upon Mountcarron and all my family? Oh, no—no! *It cannot be!* Thank Heaven! I have not seen it too late. Whatever it costs me, I must break my promise. I cannot disgrace myself in the eyes of the world. And yet—Jemmie, Jemmie! Oh, how I wish that we had never met!"

The unhappy girl locks out all intruders, not even admitting her waiting-maid to her presence, and spends half the night pacing up and down the room, weeping for Jemmie and weeping for herself, but still calling down blessings on her father's memory for having come to her assistance in this fearful extremity. At last Nature will hold out no longer, and Gladys throws herself upon

her bed, and sleeps. But though her waking in the morning is as the waking of the condemned man who knows he will be hung as soon as breakfast is concluded, it finds her still resolute, for her dear father's sake (or so she tells herself), to break the tie which binds her to her lover, and to remain the Countess of Mountcarron.

CHAPTER II.

"GOOD-BYE!"

THE promised letter from Lady Renton arrives at breakfast-time. Gladys, pale, hollow-eyed and nervous, feels like a criminal as she takes it in her hand.

"Who is that from?" demands Mountcarron, looking up from his buttered toast and pigeon pie.

"Only a note from Elinor. She asks me to spend a few days at Nutley, but—but I shall not go."

"You had much better go, my dear. You're looking a perfect ghost. The change will do you good. Don't forget we go to London the first week in May, and I want you to look your best for the

season. Why, I haven't trotted you out anywhere yet, and you have to do me credit, you know."

"I will try," she answers, with a faint smile.

"Much better accept Nell's invitation," he continues. "She and Jem will cheer you up. It is dull for you here alone, and I have to run over to Brighton to-morrow till Monday."

"I will think about it, Mountcarron," she replies, as she leaves the room.

But she sends no answer to Lady Renton's letter. Nor does any light cart take luggage over to Nutley in the course of the morning.

It will be time enough to explain all that—she thinks—when she meets Jemmie in the park. At three o'clock she walks to the place appointed, shivering as if she had the ague. Mr. Brooke is there before her, his handsome face flushed with the pleasures of anticipation. As soon as he perceives

the direction in which she is advancing, he hastens to meet her.

"My darling girl! How good of you to be so punctual. Everything is ready, Gladys. Two minutes will take us to the carriage. But how is it that you sent no luggage over to Nutley! Has it gone to the station? I have been looking out for it all the morning."

"Yes—no!" says Lady Mountcarron, sinking down upon "the Lovers' Seat." "But oh, Jemmie, wait one moment. Don't go just yet. I want to speak to you first."

She is so ghastly pale, and the lines which betokens her night's vigil are so apparent beneath her eyes, that Mr. Brooke, regarding her, becomes alarmed.

"Are you ill, my dearest? How white you are, and how you tremble! Oh, Gladys, surely you are not afraid to come with me. Indeed, you need not be, for I will defend you with the last drop of my blood to my life's end."

"I am not afraid," she stammers, "but —but—my father!"

"What of your father? Is he at Carronby?"

"No, no! but he will be so angry with me—so distressed."

Jemmie looks grave.

"Of course he will, darling—that is at first. A great many people will be both angry and distressed—at first. But it will all blow over, after awhile, and that is the penalty we have to pay for our love, dear Gladys. And it is worth all that, isn't it?—a thousand times over."

"Oh, yes! But still! Jemmie, don't be angry with me—try to listen quietly——"

"Listen to *what?*" he exclaims. "We have no time for listening, Gladys! You must come with me now, and tell me all you have to say, as we drive to Aylmer."

"No, no! hear me first. I *must* say

it. I *cannot* go—I cannot leave my father."

"*What!*" exclaims Mr. Brooke, retreating a few paces from her.

"I cannot consent to leave my father," goes on Lady Mountcarron hurriedly. "It would break his heart to hear I had done this thing. And you know it is wrong, Jemmie, very—*very* wrong! We shall be a disgrace to everybody, and there will be a divorce—and just think what your sister will say, and Mountcarron, and all the world, and——"

"Do you mean me to understand that you have changed your mind?" asks Mr. Brooke in a low voice.

"Oh, no! I shall never change my mind—I shall always love you! How could I leave off loving you? But to run away together! It will be such an awful scandal. And I was only married ten months ago."

"Then you *have* changed your mind," he

repeats slowly, regarding her with a fixed and angry look.

"No! I haven't. Oh, Jemmie! don't look at me like that," she sobs, "if you knew what I have been suffering all night, you would pity me. I thought I should go mad. Put it off for a little while, Jemmie. Don't let us decide so soon. Let us wait, and see what time brings us. It is such a terrible thing to do, and it never can be undone!"

"You are right there," he answers. "It never can be undone. It is only a pity you did not think of that before. But we are wasting time. Are you coming with me, or are you not? One word, 'yes' or 'no,' decides the matter."

"Oh, Jemmie! think of my father."

"No! I can't think of your father. I can think only of you and of myself. Yesterday you promised to leave this place with me for ever. To-day you tremble and draw back. Which is the true woman,

and which is the false one? I *will* have your answer. Tell me at once?"

"I cannot break my father's heart," she says. "You must forgive me, but I cannot go."

"*Your father's heart!*" he repeats sarcastically; "your father's heart has nothing to do with it. Why don't you call things by their right names? It is your own heart you are afraid to break, Lady Mountcarron. It is your gilded coronet, and your title, and your fortune, that you cannot make up your mind to forfeit for my sake. And I—fool that I am—I thought *you loved me!*"

"Oh, Jemmie! I *do* love you! You are all the world to me."

"Silence, Gladys! and don't pollute your soul with further falsehoods. *Love!* you don't know the meaning of the word. *Love* that knows no duty, and no law but one—the law of loving. You have played fast and loose with me, for your own

amusement, and now that I interfere with your convenience you throw me over, and call that *love*. You are a coquette! A heartless, scheming coquette, and nothing more."

"How can you call me so," she cries, "when I am breaking my heart for you? Oh, Jemmie, I would do anything in all the world for you but *this*. I *cannot* do this."

"Anything in all the world," he echoes, "but the one thing you have sworn to do. But I refuse to take anything else. You have drawn me on to serve your own purposes, and you would like to keep me there, a wretched victim writhing in the net at your feet, and amuse yourself with the contemplation of my agonies. But you shall not have that consolation, Gladys. I told you yesterday that you must either take me or leave me; and you have made your choice. God forgive you for it."

"It is *not* my choice," she exclaims bitterly. "It is my misfortune. Think of

the position I should be in—of the disgrace that would attach to me, and all my people for my sake, and tell me if I can be so selfish, as to think only of my own gratification and pleasure?"

"What else did you think of when you refused to let me walk in the path of duty I had chalked out for myself? How many times, since the fatal hour I first saw you, have I tried to get clear of your toils, and you have come after me, and drawn me into them again? And now! when I believed the climax of my happiness had come, and you had found that my love was worth more than all the world to you—*now* you strike the final blow, and tell me there is some one dearer to you than myself. Oh, my God," cries Jemmie, sinking down upon the bench and burying his face in his hands. "You might at least have been merciful enough to put me out of my misery at once."

Gladys leaves her seat and goes up to

him and tries to pull his hands from before his face, and make him look at her.

"Jemmie, dear! Everything will be the same as before. I shall always—*always* love you, and you can be at Carronby as much as you like! Mountcarron is always asking me why you are not more with us."

She nestles her face against his, and tries to kiss him. Hitherto she has found a kiss a panacea for every woe. But Mr. Brooke pushes her face angrily away, and moves from his position.

"Leave me alone. I don't want your protestations or your kisses. I want nothing from you but what you have refused to give me. I told you yesterday that I should leave Carronby with or without you. I repeat that assertion now. There can be no shilly-shallying between you and me any more. If you cannot make up your mind to resign that precious thing, your coronet, for my sake——"

"Oh, Jemmie! how unkind you are, when I tell you it is the thought of my poor father."

"Your precious coronet and title," he goes on, unheeding; "then we must part for ever. There is no alternative, Gladys. I will have *all* of you or *none!*"

"You would not leave me *for ever*, Jemmie?" she says, with trembling lips. "You *could* not!"

"*For ever and for ever*," he repeats, with clenched teeth. "Make your choice again, if you wish to do so, I will abide by my word, though you have broken yours."

"I cannot go. It is impossible," she wails.

"And it is just as well! You have shown me once that your promise is not to be depended on. How could I have felt sure you would be true to me, any more than you have been to Mountcarron? The next man who crosses your path may be stronger than I am, or love you less. He

may not trust you alone with your vows to him for twelve whole hours (he will show his wisdom if he does not), and then you will fall into his hands, and your treasured coronet will vanish like a dream. I hope it may. I hope I may live to see you stripped of that, and everything."

"Oh, how cruel—how very cruel you are to me!"

"You have made me cruel! You have made me feel as if I could kill you where you stand! But I will not reproach you further. You are too weak—too false even for my regrets. Good-bye, Gladys!" he says, suddenly rising. "You have raised a devil in me. Remember, that whatever happens now lies at your door!"

"Oh, Jemmie," she screams, "do not leave me like this! Speak one word to me—only say one word of kindness! I cannot—*cannot* let you go like this!"

She throws herself upon the rustic seat

in an agony of grief; but Mr. Brooke does not retrace his steps to comfort her On the contrary, she hears him slam the park gate behind him, and hasten down the road. And then Lady Mountcarron knows that he has gone, really gone from her as he said himself—*for ever*—and she abandons herself to a feeling very like despair.

How long she remains upon that seat she never seems to know, but the chills of evening have gathered round her, when she rises to go home, and the damp green moss has stained the skirt of her spring dress. Her eyelids are painfully swollen, and her head feels light and empty, and her limbs shake as she drags them wearily along. She hardly knows how she manages to reach the house, but she gains it at last, and feels, as she enters it (though all its splendour and its luxury are hers), as if her world were shut outside the door.

She is still the Countess of Mount-

carron. She has still the right to wear the coronet of an English peeress, and hold her beautiful head up proudly amongst her fellows. But yet she feels as if the poorest girl, who has a lawful lover, is richer than herself.

She is the mistress of Carronby House, the possessor of thousands, her father's unstained daughter, and her husband's wife.

Yet as she sinks—hopeless, helpless, despairing—on her luxurious lounge, she is conscious of a bitter void in her heart, which nothing and nobody can fill—of a cruel longing, that resolves itself in one long, low cry of "*Jemmie!*"

CHAPTER III.

"A SISTER'S COUNSEL."

THE same evening, about nine o'clock, Lady Renton is sitting at her private writing table in the morning-room at Nutley, engaged in correspondence. She has been all the day alone. She has eaten her dinner in solitude, and heard little Hugh his prayers, and seen him safely put to bed, and now she is trying to answer letters of business from Edinburgh and Liverpool, and other large towns, in which are situated branches of the society in which she is interested. But she cannot give her mind to her work. Her heart is ill at ease about her brother. She cannot understand the way in which he is treating her. At breakfast, that morning, he

seemed gayer than he had done for some time before. His sister did not quite like the loudness of his laugh, nor the bright spot of crimson that burned on either cheek; but Jemmie had been so downcast and depressed of late, that she was glad to see him cheerful. He had kissed her unnecessarily often (so Lady Renton imagined) before he went out for his morning stroll, but she attributed that effusion, also, to the recovery of his spirits. And then she had heard nothing more of him until four o'clock, when a messenger delivered a note at Nutley, to say that Jemmie had gone over to Brighton for a few days, and she was not to expect him back until she heard from him. Lady Renton cannot make it out. She cannot understand her brother leaving home, even for so short a time, without giving her further intimation of the matter. It is so unlike him; so unlike the way in which he has been accustomed to treat her. From a

child he has been so much her charge, and she his *confidante*, that there have never been any concealments between them. But Jemmie has altered lately—so Lady Renton tells herself, with a sigh—greatly altered; there is no doubt of that.

She has questioned his valet, and found that Mr. Brooke took both of his portmanteaux with him, and that a public conveyance from Aylmer fetched them to the station. This circumstance annoys her even more than the other. If Jemmie had suddenly made up his mind that it would do him good to run over to Brighton and see his friends, she would not have been so surprised; but this visit is premeditated; he meant to leave Nutley when he kissed her after breakfast, and why should he have not said so? What is this barrier that has risen up between them, and shut her out from the confidence of her boy-brother? What has she done to make him afraid to tell her his troubles, as of yore?

Though Elinor Renton cannot give the question a certain answer, she can make a pretty shrewd guess at it. She has not been "wooed an' married an' a'" for nothing. She is a woman *in* the world, though she is not *of* the world, and she suspects strongly that there is another woman at the bottom of her poor Jemmie's fitful moods of gaiety and despair; and that idea worries her beyond the rest.

She told Lady Mountcarron only the day before that she dreaded her brother falling in love, for he was a man to throw his whole heart and soul into the master passion. And she meant what she said. She has watched Jemmie grow up from a sensitive, nervous, affectionate child, into a sensitive, nervous, aad deep-feeling man —a man who, whilst knowing that few women are divine, holds to the creed that somewhere in the wide world a female divinity waits for himself, and who, when he believes he has found

her, will worship her all the more devoutly, because she is so rare and difficult a woman to be met with. She believes that where Jemmie's heart goes out, everything that is best in him will follow, and that if his passion does not prosper, everything that is worst in him will come to the surface. This fond sister does not believe that *much* in Jemmie can be bad, still she knows him to be but mortal, and she trembles for his virtue as well as for his happiness. And his late moods have not looked like prosperous moods to her. Who is it who can have given him pain? Lady Renton runs over all the young ladies of the neighbourhood in her mind, and dismisses them as ineligible. Miss Rusherton! Jemmie would never think of her as a wife. She is a fine girl, and she has money; but she is fast and bold, and the very reverse of what her brother admires in the fair sex. Then the Vicar's daughters, the three

pretty Miss Onslows! Mr. Brooke's name has been coupled with theirs more than once; but it was only the ordinary gossip of a country village. He plays tennis with them, or strolls home with them from church. He cannot make the story of a life out of such materials as these. Besides which, if Jémmie had set his fancy (it could be *but* a fancy) upon one of those doll-faced little Onslows, Lady Renton is quite certain there would be no despair about the matter, and that he might have any one of them—all three of them, indeed, if it were left to *their* decision—for the asking. No, no, her handsome brother could never set up a heartache for any such stupid little mortals. And who else in Carronby was there for the boy to fall in love with? He could hardly have become enamoured of Mrs. Scott, the plump widow of the late incumbent, or of Miss Parsons, who was at least fifty, and whose hair was

grey. Lady Renton's speculations do not wander beyond the gentry of the village. It would be impossible to make her believe that Jemmie's fancy could fix itself on anyone beneath the sphere of a gentlewoman. Not that she credits him with greater moral strength, or more virtue than the rest of his sex; but she knows him to be too honourable to tamper with feelings, the indulgence of which could only bring their owner to disgrace. The daughters of the tenantry of Carronby are safe, she feels, from Jemmie, and have nothing to do with his present state of mind. They are at once too high and too low for him—too high for infamy, too low for marriage. Oh! no, the woman—if it is a woman—who has the power to wield her brother's nature until he becomes unlike himself must be something very different from these. But who on earth can she be? Lady Renton is musing thus, with her head upon her

hand, and her half-finished letters pushed to one side, when a familiar step on the gravelled drive, which leads to the house, catches her ear. Surely — surely — that *must* be Jemmie! She cannot mistake his tread. And yet, he is at Brighton. This doubt alone keeps her in her seat. Were it not for that her anxiety would have made her run and open the door to him; but she hears the visitor mount the steps and pull the bell, stamp his feet upon the door-mat, in Jemmie's impatient manner, and then walk through the hall.

She is certain now that it is her brother. He has come back from Brighton, or he has changed his mind and never gone there; and Elinor turns her face, wreathed in smiles, towards the door, ready to welcome him directly he appears. But no one comes to her. The hall door is closed —the footsteps die away—and all is once more silence. Lady Renton becomes both curious and impatient to learn the cause.

She rings her bell sharply. The footman appears to answer it.

"Was that Mr. Brooke who came in just now?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Where is he? Why doesn't he come in here?"

"Mr. Brooke didn't speak, my lady?"

"Is he in the dining-room? Has he ordered dinner—or supper? or anything?"

"No, my lady, he ordered nothing, and he said nothing. He just went straight upstairs to his room, my lady, for I heard him slam the door."

"Very well. You can go."

But she is trembling all over as she dismisses him. What can be the matter with her boy, that he should evade her thus? A thousand fears of, she knows not what, rush into Lady Renton's mind, and, without further delay, she rushes upstairs and taps at the door of her brother's chamber. No answer! Elinor taps again,

and without further ceremony, enters the room.

Jemmie is lying on the bed, face downward, and sobbing, as only a man can sob whose heart is passing through the throes of a first disappointment.

Lady Renton is infinitely shocked. All the motherly feelings she entertains for her young brother rise to the surface as she bends over him, and watches the labour with which he catches his sobbing breath —a labour which leaves his eyes still hard and dry.

"Jemmie! my own, darling boy! What ails you?" she cried. "Are you in trouble, Jemmie? What has occurred to vex you? Surely you will have no secrets from your sister?"

"Go away! It is nothing," he says, in a stifled voice.

"It cannot be nothing, Jemmie, that upsets you like this. I have watched you for weeks past, dear, and knew you had

something on your mind. But I never thought there would be such an estrangement between us that you would suffer and not tell me of it at last."

"There is no estrangement, Nell," he answers, ashamed at having had a witness to his weakness; "but— but— there are some things one cannot tell, even to a friend like you."

"Has it anything to do with Brighton, Jemmie? Why have you returned so soon, dear?"

"I have not been there."

"Then where have you been all day?"

"God knows. I can hardly tell myself. Somewhere, I suppose. In the woods, or the fields, or the covers. What does it signify?"

"You have not been at Carronby?"

A visible shudder passes through his frame, but he answers firmly:

"No!"

"Have you eaten nothing, darling?"

"No. Don't worry me. I don't want to eat. The kindest thing you can do, Nell, is to go away and leave me alone."

"So I will dear, after a little. But let me talk to you first. You are suffering, Jemmie, terribly—you have suffered for weeks past—I have seen it all; and there is some suffering which, if kept to oneself, breaks the heart it is pent up in. Can't you make a friend of me, dear brother, and relieve your mind by telling me of your trouble?"

"It is impossible. Don't ask it."

"When our dear mother died," she goes on softly, "she called me, as a girl of ten years old, to her bedside, and said, 'Nellie, you must be a little mother to my baby,' and I have looked upon her last charge as sacred. You were always called 'Miss Nellie's baby,' Jemmie, even in the nursery, and as you grew up I regarded you as my own. I don't believe," Lady Renton goes on tearfully, "I don't believe that at this

moment Hugh is so dear to me as you. Oh, my own boy—my own dear Jemmie, don't thrust me out of your heart now. Tell me your trouble, and let us seek a cure for it together."

Mr. Brooke has brought his shamefaced eyes to bear upon hers by this time.

He has twisted himself round into a sitting position, and is seated on the side of the bed, with his hair ruffled, his heated face stained and blurred, and his hands clasped over his knees.

The look of utter despair which seems to pervade his whole figure touches his sister's heart to the very quick.

"It is useless," he says bitterly. "My trouble is one without a cure."

"I cannot believe that," replies Lady Renton; "there is only *one* trouble in this world which admits of *no* cure, Jemmie, and that is what will never fall on you—dishonour. Other wounds may be hard to bear, but time brings the healing for them.

Is it money, dear? Have you had any heavy losses?"

"*Money!*" he echoes scornfully. "Do you suppose I should have made a fool of myself like this, for *money?*"

"It is not illness?"

"No, it is not illness."

"Then, there is only one cause for it, Jemmie, and that is—*a woman.* Am I not right?" she adds wistfully.

"And if you are—what then?"

"Why I cannot believe that things will not cure themselves right in time. No woman could hold out long against you, Jemmie. And men misinterpret us so. What we intend sometimes for a becoming reticence and modesty, they as often as not misconstrue into coldness or dislike. You must not take her at her word, Jemmie. You must try again. I don't believe the girl lives who could refuse you a second time, that is if she is free."

"You've hit the right nail on the head at last, Elinor. She is not free."

"What, *engaged!* Oh, how unfortunate! How was it you did not hear of it before. But, even in that case, hope is not altogether over. Marriages are put off every day, you know. How can you tell what may happen to prevent this one."

"My dear sister! In your goodness of heart, and your love for me, you are talking the most execrable nonsense. You have guessed that my trouble proceeds from a disappointment. So far you are right. But let it rest there. I cannot tell you anything more."

"But I cannot have you fretting like this," says Lady Renton, "you will be ill if you do not make an effort to shake off this grief. What do you mean to do about it?"

"I am going away—the sooner the better, and the farther the better. I want to leave Carronby at once. I am sure you will

agree with me that it is the best thing to do."

"Then she lives in Carronby?" exclaims Lady Renton, with feminine curiosity.

Mr. Brooke feels as if he had been caught in a trap. He colours violently, and is silent.

"As if I should ever betray your secrets," says his sister, in a voice of reproach. "As if they would not be as sacred to me, as my own. If our dear mother had lived you would have had no hesitation in going to her, Jemmie. You make me feel how poor a substitute I have been for her."

"No, no! Elinor. Don't say that. But look here, dear, you are a good, pure woman—the best and purest woman that I know—and I reverence you from the bottom of my heart. Is it fit, then, that I should come to you with *all* my troubles? You know how a young man's life differs from that of his sister. How full it is of

faults and follies. How much there may be in it that is unfit for her to listen to—impossible for her to sympathise with. Am I not right—and will it not be better for me to lock such things in the recesses of my own heart, however much I may want a comforter and a friend?"

"No, Jemmie," says Lady Renton decidedly, "I don't think so. Whatever is not too bad for you to do is not too bad for me to hear! Don't be afraid of me, darling. If you had broken every clause in the Decalogue, and I could help or comfort you, you should never see a look in my face that savoured of anything but pity for your sin."

"You are the best and dearest sister in the world," says Mr. Brooke fondly, "and I *will* tell you, Elinor—not that you can help me in any possible way, but because I should wish you to know that I am not going to leave Nutley and you without real cause. I *have* met the love of my life, Nell,

and I can never gratify it because she—she is—*a married woman!*"

The conscious blood dyes his fair face to his very forehead as he blurts out the words, he is so terribly afraid that Elinor will guess *who* is the object of his love. But, if she does, she makes no sign. She is considerably startled by his confidence. It is a terrible thing to hear that her brother has been so peculiarly unfortunate in his attachment, but she will not let him see it.

She only draws a long breath and exclaims:

"*A married woman!* Oh! Jemmie—then there is indeed no hope—no safety, but in flight."

"I knew you would say so if you knew all. Besides—besides—I couldn't trust myself to meet her or see her again."

"Do you love her so much as all that, my poor boy?" says his sister.

"I love her like my life," he exclaimed, passionately. "Like the very core and

essence of my life, and I was fool enough to think she loved me, in some measure. I asked her to cast in her lot with mine —Oh! you may as well know the whole extent of my folly at once, Elinor—and she consented, and placed me on the very pinnacle of human happiness. And then—just when (as I thought) she was about to crown the wildest hopes I ever entertained regarding her she knocked everything on the head. She drew back—curse her! and left me to do the best I can with the life she has ruined for me."

And Mr. Brooke casts himself headlong upon the bed again. Lady Renton is silent for a moment, and then she says, gently:

"Jemmie, darling! *that* is not love."

"What do you mean?" he answers hoarsely.

"To wish to pull her down to the lowest depths of wrong, and then to curse her because she was kinder to you than you have been to her, or to yourself."

"It was not kindness," he growls, "it was fear. She threw me over because she was afraid to do as she had promised."

"Whatever motive it was from, Jemmie, her refusal has saved you both from, perhaps, a life-long penitence. Dearest boy, I do not feel for you the less. It is an awful calamity to fall upon one so young as you are. But it may be your salvation, Jemmie. It may be the means of changing your whole future life."

"I don't see how it can be the means myself of doing anything but make me deucedly miserable. Don't talk of it any more, Nell. It has nearly broken my heart."

Lady Renton thinks it wiser to comply with her brother's wishes, and not to make any further attempt to wrest his secret from him. She cannot help suspecting who is the object of his attachment, and the idea shocks her terribly.

Here is a wound (she tells herself)

which probing can only make worse, and of which the cure must be left to time alone. But the first and the best thing to do is to get him away from the scene of his misery and out of the reach of temptation. To that end Lady Renton feels that all her energies must be directed.

"You wish to leave Carronby?" she says presently.

"I *must* and I *will* leave it," he answers. "Had it been possible, I should have gone to-night."

"I am glad, though, very glad, you did not go without seeing me again, dear. And have you made any plans for yourself?"

"Not yet. I shall go straight to London for a few days, and look about me. Any place will do, so it be far enough away. India, Africa, or America. It signifies nothing, so long as the sea rolls between us."

"What do you think of Alexandria, Jemmie?"

"Why Alexandria? What has put that into your head?"

"Only that poor Charlie Renton—Edmund's cousin, you may remember—is lying ill there, and your company would be a great solace to him."

"Oh, bother Charlie Renton! I've enough to do to think of solacing myself just now."

"He was a captain in the army," continues Elinor, not heeding this interpolation, "and was shot in the breast during the last Cape skirmishes. The bullet was extracted, and the doctors considered him safe, but he developed symptoms of pulmonary consumption soon after, and was ordered out of England. He went to the East, and was on his way home again, when his strength suddenly failed him at Alexandria, and I am afraid he will not live to return. His mother wrote me a piteous

letter on the subject last week. She is too old and feeble to go to him, and he has no near relatives. I have been seriously thinking over the possibility of my going to him myself. But if *you* would take my place, Jemmie, it would be an act of real charity."

"What's Charlie Renton to me?" asks Jemmie roughly. "I've never even seen him."

"Only a fellow sufferer, dear—a man who, from no fault of his own, is doomed to die in exile, and away from his own friends. Sometimes we find, Jemmie, that in trying to heal the wounds of others, we have found a cure for our own."

"That's not likely to happen in my case, Elinor, but if you think I can be of any use to your cousin, I'll go. Poor beggar! it must be hard lines for him, though I could almost envy his getting rid of this confounded life so soon. There's nothing but treachery

and disappointment in it from beginning to end."

She does not refute this assertion from the lips of four-and-twenty, but laying her hand upon his fair head, says gently:

"Thank you, darling, so much. Edmund loved poor Charlie, and will be so pleased to see you do this for his sake and mine. When will you start?"

"By the first steamer from Brindisi. When do they go?"

"I am not quite sure, but it is easily ascertained. On Fridays, I think. If so, you will be in time to catch the next, Jemmie."

"Any way, I'll get across to Brindisi at once. It will be something to do," he says, rising to his feet. "Where's Saunders? He had better pack my things to-night, so that I may catch the nine express to-morrow."

"Oh, Jemmie, you will try and get some sleep first."

"*Sleep*, I feel as if I should never sleep again. But leave me alone now, Elinor, and let me go my own way. Be up in time to see me off in the morning, and have a letter of introduction ready to that beggar at Alexandria, that he may know who I am. Good-night!"

He kisses her, and pushes her gently towards the door, as he speaks, and Lady Renton knows it would be useless to resist Her brother is but a boy, with all a boy's high spirit and reckless daring, but he has the strong will of a man, and his sister has been made to feel it on more than one occasion, although there are ten years between them.

CHAPTER IV.

"NEW SCENES AND FACES."

BY ten o'clock next morning Mr. Brooke is far away from Carronby. Before the breakfast table, at which he took his hurried meal, is cleared, he has vanished from Nutley, his valet and his portmanteaux have gone with him, and the housemaid is putting his bedroom into that straight, formal condition which bedrooms never assume whilst they have an occupant.

And then for the first time Lady Renton has leisure to sit down, and think of the sad confession that has been revealed to her, and cry over the prospect of losing her brother for months and perhaps years. All is so dark and uncertain in the future both for him and her. She can only hope

that Jemmie's wound is not so deep as he imagines it to be, and that change of scene and action may have such a beneficial effect upon him as to send him back to Nutley sooner than they anticipate. But the place is sad and gloomy without his presence, and Lady Renton has the unpleasant task before her of breaking the news of his sudden departure to Lord and Lady Mountcarron. Altogether she feels very melancholy. There is only one bright spot in the whole business. She has urged her brother to do what is right, and he has done it. They must leave the rest to Heaven.

Meanwhile Jemmie speeds rapidly across the Continent to Brindisi, and though he is conscious of a continuous, dull pain at his heart, and a very bitter pang whenever the lovely face and figure of Gladys Mountcarron recur to his memory, he manages to eat, drink and smoke much the same as other men, and even to take some little interest in what is passing around him.

It is always the case with those who go away. Women generally suffer most from a separation between the sexes, not because they feel the most, but because they are *left behind*. Mr. Brooke is fortunate in not being kept waiting, beyond a few hours, at Brindisi—still more so, in finding a fine vessel and a charming set of passengers, who are all disposed to show favour to the young and handsome Englishman.

The girls who are bound for Calcutta and Madras are *desolées* at finding he is not going further than Alexandria, and the men seem disposed to make the short voyage as pleasant to him as they possibly can. And Jemmie is more inclined to seek the society of his own sex than that of the ladies. The company of women hurts him. He believes he can never mix in it again, and, avoiding the moonlit deck and flirtation, confines himself entirely to the saloon and poker. One man on board, a Major Austin, and Mr. Brooke have soon made

fast friends, unusually fast friends indeed, for Englishmen, who generally look at each other like two curs about to fight, directly they are introduced.

But Major Austin, like Jemmie, also avoids the society of the lady passengers, and directs his attention to cards, and brandies and sodas.

He is a young man for his rank in the army, good-humoured and gay—almost to boisterousness, although every now and then, in the height of his mirth, a mysterious shade will steal over his face, and he will heave a sigh — catching himself up the instant after, with a laugh, as though he had been detected in a crime.

Mr. Brooke thinks Major Austin one of the best fellows he has ever met—takes a prodigious fancy to him, in fact—and sets him down as a confirmed bachelor, almost a woman-hater, from his evident avoidance of the fair sex.

One evening, when they have been out at

sea about a week, and Jemmie feels a little less sad than usual, he ventures to rally his new acquaintance on this trait in his character.

"Did you see how angry Miss Perry looked when you refused to take her hint about helping her up the companion-ladder, Austin?" he remarks. "You're in her black books for the rest of the voyage, you may depend upon that."

"Can't help it, my dear fellow," replies the major nonchalantly. "If you once begin to wait on these women, you may resign yourself to it altogether. It's your deal."

"You don't seem to care about that sort of thing any more than I do?" says Jemmie.

"I give you my word I don't. I've gone through the mill more than once, when my regiment was out in India. Let they once catch you and you won't get your liberty again till you're ashore—if then. However,

my journey ends at Alexandria this time, so I'm pretty safe."

"You stay at Alexandria?" exclaims Jemmie, secretly pleased at the intelligence. "So do I."

"Indeed! Hope we shall see more of each other. There's a very fair club there. Where do you stay?"

"At the 'Empress of India.'"

"So do I! Upon my word, that's lucky. Do you remain there long?"

"I don't know! I am going out to see if I can be of any use to a connection of my family, Captain Renton of the 3rd Buffs. The poor fellow went there for his health, and has been taken so ill he can't return. Deuced hard, isn't it?"

"Deuced! It's a horrid time of the year for Alexandria, though. I didn't mean to stay there over a few days, but I shan't be in such a hurry to make my plans now. It is such a comfort to find a man you can get on with in this world."

"You are not going out on duty, then?" says Jemmie, enquiringly.

"No! Pleasure—for the sake of something to do. It's your play, Brooke! Confound those women! If they're not coming down here again. Why on earth can't they keep on deck?"

After this conversation, Jemmie is rather surprised the following day, as he is walking up and down the deck, to see Major Austin emerge from the companion stairs with a lady on his arm.

She is a very pretty, fragile-looking woman, with a startled expression so like that of Gladys in her eyes that it makes his heart jump. He watches his new acquaintance with the utmost curiosity as Major Austin places the lady in a chair and carefully wraps her shawls around her.

"Who on earth has he got hold of, now?" thinks Jemmie, "and how did he get so intimate with her? It's very funny.

I thought he didn't know a woman on board."

He is still more perplexed when Major Austin beckons him to his side.

"Let me introduce you to Mrs. Austin, Brooke. Fanny, this is the gentleman I have mentioned to you, who is going to Alexandria with us. Mrs. Austin has been very ill, until to-day," he continues, to Jemmie, "so I had great difficulty in getting her on deck, even now, but I am sure the fresh air will do her good."

"I have been nearly dead," says Mrs. Austin, with another of those looks that bring Gladys back to Jemmie's mind, and send the blood in torrents to his face.

"I am so sorry to hear it!" he rejoins, hardly knowing what he says in his embarrassment and surprise, "but we are through the Bay, now, and shall have no more rough weather. We are in sight of Malta."

"I shall be so thankful when we get to Alexandria," says Mrs. Austin.

"Don't be too sure of that, little woman," replies the major laughing. "Alexandria is not the nicest place in the world, but I won't keep you there if you don't like it."

"I am *sure* to like it," says the lady, with a look at her husband that makes Jemmie think that they cannot have been long married.

But Austin in the capacity of bridegroom —after all he had said and done respecting the fair sex—appears such a very strange idea to him that he cannot get over it, and his conversation with Mrs. Austin is desultory and commonplace.

She does not stay very long on deck, and after she has gone down again, the major turns to Jem, and—almost sharply, as he thinks—asks him what made him so ill at ease with his wife.

"Well, to tell you the truth," replies Mr. Brooke, "you took me so completely by surprise, it knocked me into a cocked hat. Why didn't you tell me you were married?

I had not the slightest idea of it—in fact, everything you said seemed to prove the contrary."

"Did it?" returns Austin, rather nervously. "Well I never obtrude my private affairs upon society, unless something calls for it. It did not enter my head to mention Mrs. Austin to you; but now you have seen her, I hope you will be good friends."

"I think she is charming," says Jemmie, "so much so that I wonder you could refrain from talking of her. What a blow it will be to some of these young ladies to find out you are a married man."

"They are scarcely likely to hear it. Fan won't show her face much on deck until we get to Alexandria, and she was never disposed to make friends with or place confidences in her own sex. I expect she knows them too well."

As the major has prophesied, Mrs. Austin seldom leaves her cabin for more than a

couple of hours a day, and those towards the evening, so that her presence on board attracts little attention. Mr. Brooke generally spends these hours by her side, more with a desire to please her husband than herself. Austin has been attentive to him, and he wishes to return it, if possible, through his wife. But he hardly knows what to make of Mrs. Austin. She is certainly not a shy woman when he is quite alone with her, and yet she seems shy in the presence of others, especially if any of the ladies stop and speak to her or make enquiries after her health.

She has travelled, apparently, half over the world—she has lived in the highest society—and she has reached perhaps thirty years of age—still there are moments when she might be an *ingenué* for timidity and bashfulness. Every now and then she seems to shrink into her shell, and close up like a sensitive plant, from the rough notice of the world. Jemmie soon notices also

that Mrs. Austin is less at ease in the presence of the major than when he is absent; and at one time a doubt seizes him whether Austin is as kind to her as he ought to be. But this suspicion soon melts away. Occasional glances which he sees pass between them—furtive looks of affection, when they think they are unobserved—convince him that Austin is as much in love with his wife as she is with him. He attributes her timidity, therefore, to the delicacy of her health, and heaves a bitter sigh sometimes as he sees them sitting in the dusk together, and fancies how happy *he* should be were Gladys the companion of his voyage, and he could wait on her and watch her, and protect her, as Major Austin does his wife. By the time they have reached Alexandria, the two have formed quite an intimate friendship, and look forward with pleasure to occupying the same hotel.

The "Empress of India" is the name of

the house where Captain Renton is lying ill, and of course Mr. Brooke will go to no other; so he and his friends proceed thither as soon as they land in Alexandria. At the last moment they discover that the Perrys, a stuck-up and unpleasant mother, and two rather ancient sisters, are bound for the same place. Jemmie jokes Austin on the subject, declaring that *he* is the attraction that has drawn them thither; but the major does not take the joke in good part—is unnecessarily annoyed by it—Mr. Brooke thinks, and by the presence of the Perrys, which is really not worth caring about, one way or the other. Mrs. Austin looks frightened at her husband's little outburst also, and lays her hand on his arm in a deprecating manner, and, altogether, Jemmie conceives the idea that Austin must have known the Perrys in other times, and got some grudge against them. So he drops the subject as soon as possible, and busies himself in making Mrs

Austin comfortable in the boat that takes them ashore.

As soon as they are located at the hotel, he sends in his card and letter of introduction to Captain Renton, and receives an immediate invitation to his rooms. He emerges from the full light of the sunny corridor into the venetian-shaded gloom of a sick chamber, where a young man, supported on pillows in an arm-chair —haggard, unshorn, and emaciated to the last degree—holds out an attenuated hand to him.

"Is that you, Brooke?" he says, with a ghastly smile that makes him appear still more death-like; "how good of you to come and look after a poor devil like me! How can I ever thank you enough?"

Jemmie is very much shocked. He expected to meet a sick man, but he thought it would be a man who could walk about. He has had no experience of the fearful weakness that accompanies the last stage of

consumption—of the lingering exhaustion that marks the disease—the emaciation that accompanies it. As he comes closer to Captain Renton's chair, he starts as if he saw a corpse, and his surprise and commiseration are patent in his face.

"You didn't think you'd find me so ill, I suppose?" says the invalid. "Why, my dear fellow, I'm at my last gasp."

Jemmie's young strong hand grasps that of the sick man almost too firmly, as he replies:

"Indeed, I had not the slightest idea of it. Elinor—that's my sister, Lady Renton, you know—told me you were very seedy and unable to proceed to England—so, as I wanted a change, and we are, in a way, connected with each other, I thought I'd just run over and see if I could be of any use to you. But I never thought you were as bad as this."

"You're in time to bury me, Brooke, that's all——"

"My dear boy! I hope it's not come to that?"

"Well, it is—that's to say, there's no earthly chance of my recovery. But you needn't look so solemn over it. I've known it was coming for months past, and I'm quite reconciled to the idea. The only thing I felt was, dying alone, and amongst strangers—and I hate these black beggars about me so. But since you have come—if the prospect don't frighten you—it's all right."

"I wish we had known of it before!" says Jemmie, taking a chair by his side—"but your mother only wrote the news to my sister last week, and Elinor said, if I couldn't have come to you, she would have done so herself."

"It's awfully good of you both to take so much trouble about a fellow you've hardly seen. I remember your sister well—when she first married poor Ted—but I've been knocking about the world since,

and scarcely seen England till last year, when I was invalided home."

"You got a brute of a bullet in you at the Cape, didn't you?" says Jemmie.

"Yes; grazed the lungs, and brought on the present trouble. However, it will soon be over now. The doctor says I can't hold out for more than a fortnight."

"Pshaw! I don't believe half what doctors say. I mean to nurse you so carefully, Renton, that we'll cheat that doctor, and go home together in another month or so. See if we don't."

Charlie Renton almost laughs at the prophecy.

"My dear fellow, you can't do impossibilities. I've got no lungs left. And look here, Brooke," he continues, gasping for breath, "I am afraid I shall spoil your holiday for you, but don't you worry about me. I don't *want* to live, old fellow—I've nothing particular to live for, and what remnant of life I have is only a horrible

burthen to me. When you see what I suffer at night—you will be glad with me when it's all over."

Jemmie walks to the shaded window, and tries to look out into the glaring street. He hardly knows whether to laugh or cry, he feels so upset. It seems so unnatural that *he*, who has lost everything that made life valuable to him, should be standing there, hale, hearty, and likely to live for years, whilst poor Renton, with all his future before him, should be lying at the point of death, and glad to go. How he wishes, at the moment, that they could go together. But he remembers that he has come to cheer and solace the sick man, and that this is not the way to do it.

He clears his throat, and turns, with a smile, to the arm-chair.

"If you are really so ill as that, Renton, I am all the more glad that I have come. And now, will you promise to make use of me just as if I were your brother? What-

ever you want tell me to get it, and whatever I can do for you let me do it; will you? I shall think you wish me gone again if you do not."

He holds out his hand, and grasps the poor wasted one warmly.

"It would be a bad return for your kindness if I let you think that," replies Charlie, "and so you never shall. But you must be tired and hungry. The table d'hôte is at four. Go to your rooms now, dear fellow, and come back to me when you are rested. Don't be afraid that I shall be lonely—I sleep one half the day."

"Is there nothing I can do for you before I go?"

"If you will write a letter to my mother —just a line to say you are here, and I'm getting on all right, it will be the greatest kindness possible, Brooke. I'm too weak to hold a pen, and I'm afraid the poor old soul is fretting about me. I'm her last child. But my writing days are over."

"It shall be posted this afternoon," says Jemmie, as he leaves the chamber.

He is very serious as he does so. It is a solemn thing to come face to face with death, and especially for the first time. He has had no experience of sickness, and the sight of a young man like himself, who, but a few short months before, was as vigorous and muscular as he is, stricken down, and feeble as an infant, strikes him as very awful. He tells the Austins, with hushed breath, of the state in which he has found his friend, and they commiserate them both.

Mrs. Austin is unusually pathetic, but the expression in her eyes does not affect Jemmie's pulse to-day. The sight of the dying man has driven, for a moment, even Gladys from his mind. He can think and speak of nothing but Charlie Renton, and his first anxiety is to see the doctor who attends him. But he derives small consolation from that. The doctor's only

surprise is that Captain Renton has lived so long, and he attributes it entirely to the wonderful vitality of his constitution. A weaker man, he affirms, would have succumbed in half the time. When questioned as to the probable duration of his illness, he gives the invalid a week, a fortnight, or, perhaps, a month. He cannot say. Captain Renton is in that condition when he may go to-night or to-morrow, or, if he rallies, he may live several weeks longer. It is quite uncertain. Only one thing is sure. The sick man's days are numbered, and he will never see England nor his mother again.

CHAPTER V.

"A NEW LIGHT."

MR. BROOKE is so concerned at the condition in which he finds Charlie Renton, that it is a great relief to him to have the society of the Austins to fall back upon, and he spends all the time that he can spare from the invalid with them. They occupy seats together at the public table, and are generally supposed to belong to the same party. Mrs. Austin appears to recover her spirits when she is fairly settled in the hotel; but she is still absurdly shy and retiring for a woman of her age and position, and after awhile Jemmie votes her to be stupid (notwithstanding the startled look in her eyes that reminds him so painfully of

Gladys), and not worth cultivating beyond the courtesy due to her as his friend's wife. Sometimes he almost fancies that Austin thinks so, too. He is uniformly kind and attentive to her; but he always seems glad to get away to the billiard-table or the smoking-room, and enjoy the company of his own sex. And the plaintive expression which Mrs. Austin's face will assume, as they bid her good-night and stroll off to their own haunts, makes Mr. Brooke suspect that she is not happy, however much her husband may love her. Another thing that strikes him is the notice she seems to attract at the table d'hote. She is not more than ordinarily pretty, and her manners are more than ordinarily quiet, yet there is always a buzz as they take their seats at table and as they rise to leave it, a compliment which has the effect of making Austin swear beneath his breath. One day when his friends have

left the room, and Jemmie is about to follow them, he is stopped by a newcomer, a man freshly arrived from England, who has watched them furtively from across the table all dinner-time.

"I beg your pardon," he says hurriedly, "but was not that Mrs. Messiter you were speaking to?"

"Who?" asks Jemmie perplexedly. "The lady I sat beside at table?"

"Yes—Mrs. Messiter, of Grangely?"

"Never heard of her," he replies, shaking his head. "That lady is Major Austin's wife."

"Oh! I beg your pardon, I'm sure. I must have made a mistake," says the stranger, beating a retreat, and, after a momentary surprise, Jemmie thinks no more of the circumstance. Renton has grown so weak during the last few days, and so utterly incapable of doing anything for himself, that it has been found necessary to secure the services of a

Sister of Mercy to watch beside him. In the afternoon, when the difficult task of washing and dressing the patient, and helping him from the bed to the arm-chair, has been accomplished, Jemmie usually takes her place, and stays with the sick man while she snatches a few hours' rest. Sometimes he talks to him during this period, or fans him, or writes letters to Elinor or Renton's mother, detailing the progress of his illness.

Oftener still, however, he sits silent by the shaded window, whilst Charlie occasionally utters a few weak sentences, or dozes or lies back on his pillows gasping for breath, and longing for the moment of release.

At such times the contrast between his present position and that of a few weeks back presses upon him hardly. *Then*—he was in the woods of Carronby, the fresh, green, spring woods, with a thousand tiny blossoms and leaves beginning to show

their timid heads, and a thousand birds carolling as they wooed each other and made their little nests.

Now—he sits, depressed and uncomfortable, with the hot sun of Egypt shining through the chinks of the closed venetians —with sand, and glare, and heat around him, and the flies keeping up a continual buzzing round the sick man's head.

Then—he stood, a monarch in his triumphal love, with Gladys' hand in his, and Gladys' eyes looking into his own, and Gladys' lips vowing to be true to him for ever. *Now*—he sits there alone and deserted. An exile for her sake, with no company but his own sad thoughts, no amusement but to watch the last throes of a dying man.

One day—musing thus—Jemmie heaves so deep a sigh that it attracts the attention of the invalid.

"Brooke, my dear fellow," he says feebly, "what is that?"

"What is *what*, Charlie?" exclaims Jemmie starting. "Can I get you anything?"

"Nothing, thanks But why do you sigh?"

"*Did* I sigh? Isn't it enough to make me sigh to see how ill you are."

"Not near enough, old boy. Besides, you can't deceive me, Jemmie! That sigh wasn't for me."

"You're very clever, Charlie," says Brooke, drawing nearer to his friend's chair. "But if I have any troubles, you don't suppose I'm going to worry you about them? You have quite enough to bear of your own."

"*I* have no troubles," says the sick man. "I have shaken them all off long ago! My only trouble is having to trouble others. I wish I could go at once—this very minute. Waiting makes me so fractious, I am ashamed of myself."

Jemmie places his hand on Charlie's,

as if to deprecate his mentioning such a thing.

"That is the most wonderful part of it to me," he says. "Your desire to be gone. So young as you are. So strong, and full of life, as you have been. How can you contemplate leaving this world so quietly? Doesn't it seem unnatural to you?"

"Not more so than if I had received orders for India or the Cape, or any other outlandish place. When they came suddenly they used to put me out a bit. But this has not come suddenly, Jem. I have known it for a long time, and that's why I want to be off. I feel like a traveller who has all his belongings packed and nothing left to do. It's the delay that worries me. If I only could go to-night."

"Go! *where?*" asks Jemmie.

"I don't know, and I don't care. I am content to leave all that in higher hands," replies Captain Renton. "But it is where

she is waiting for me. I am sure of that, and I am eager to be there!"

"Shall I wound you, if I ask *who* you allude to, Charlie?"

"Why, my wife to be sure!"

"*Your wife!* Have you been married?"

"Yes! Didn't Lady Renton tell you? Or perhaps she never heard of it herself. It lasted so short a time, only four months. But too long to make it possible to forget her, Jem."

"My dear Charlie! I had no idea of this. No wonder you are indifferent to death. I am the same—I mean, I *should* be the same—if I had suffered such a loss as yours."

"It *was* a loss at the time," says Renton. "She was so sweet, so pure, so good to me! I thought when she left me I must have died too. It was lucky for me I didn't."

"Why do you say that?"

"Do you think I should have followed

her to her sphere—that I could have stood on the same plane as she did? I loved her, Jemmie, ardently, but my love was all of earth. I had no higher idea of her than that. When she died it was her beauty, her sweetness, her intelligence that I mourned after. Because I could not hold her in my arms, nor touch her, nor hear her, nor see her, I thought that she was lost to me for ever. And I believe that is just why she was taken away."

"I don't understand you," says Jemmie.

"And I am not sure if I can make you understand," replies his friend, "but I will try. I think as a rule we are very ignorant of what love means, Jemmie. We love our women for their outward charms. We conceive a passion for their beauty, their sweetness, their gentle ways and manners, and we cannot rest till we have made them our own. And then we think there is an end of it, and that is all."

"And what more is there," says Brooke,

"except, of course, to love them in return and make them happy?"

The sick man flushes with excitement.

"To *unlove* ourselves, my dear fellow. To make our love for them their stepping stone to a higher life, their incentive to become purer, less earthly, more spiritual-minded. *Then* we should be true husbands and lovers. But our usual system is to pull them down to a lower plane than they stood on before they knew us."

"Can love ever degrade its object?" says Jemmie, in a low voice, as he walks away to the window.

"Not *real* love, but passion (which we call so) does it every day. Look at the myriads of marriages, which commence in adoration, and end in worse than indifference. Because men and women think love is all in all, and mutual esteem and respect are unnecessary ingredients in their happiness. I begun so with Alice, but I found out my mistake when it was too late——"

"When she had left you?" enquires Jemmie.

"Yes. When I was compelled to purify my earthly passion for her, the beauties of a spiritual love became apparent to me. I never loved my wife whilst I had her, Brooke, as I have learned to love her since she has been gone. I see the real beauty of her nature now. I see, too, how I should have pulled it down and trodden it under foot, had she remained with me. But, thank God, she has gone," he continues reverently, "and thank God I am going too, and a few days—perhaps a few hours—will see us re-united again. If you had known her, Jemmie, and if you had lost her, you would not be surprised to hear me say that the time of waiting seems very long."

Captain Renton has not been able to speak these words as they are written. He has gasped them out at long intervals, and with painful pauses.

But Jemmie understands him perfectly. At last he answers, still with his face averted:

"Perhaps I know more about it than you think for, Charlie. Perhaps I too have loved and lost, though not in the same manner as yourself."

"If that is the case, I am sorry for you, Brooke, and I am glad. Love is not perfected without suffering. It is like the garden herb, you must crush it to bring out all its sweetness."

"Sometimes it crushes you," says Jemmie.

"Not unless you allow it to do so. You see, it is the only divine thing on earth, Jem. The only thing that can never be lost."

"You are talking in riddles, Charlie."

"Love *must* elevate us, whether it is prosperous or otherwise. Passion does not. Passion degrades us to the level of the brute creation, and we know it instinc-

tively. But love, which 'seeketh not her own,' but only the good of the creature which we love——"

"Only the good of the creature which we love?" repeats Jemmie reflectively.

"Certainly, my dear fellow. No love could *harm* the object of its affection. It may be wounded itself, to death—outraged, disappointed, or betrayed. But it must always hold its *object* sacred, or it is not love."

"I suppose, then," says Jemmie curtly, wheeling round to confront him. "I suppose you think, Charlie, that if a fellow were really in love with a married woman, he'd never bolt with her?"

The dying man's eyes open in amazement.

"*Bolt with her!*" he echoes, "pull her down in the dirt—set her up as an object of scorn for men to pelt at—envelope all her future life in a cloud, and in order to gratify

his own appetite? How *can* you ask me such a question?"

Jemmie is silent. He does not quite know how he came to ask it.

"Would you slaughter a favourite animal because you wanted a drop of blood?" continues Renton. "Would you use the most valuable thing you possess to stop up a mouse-hole, or light your fire with bank-notes? Men who did such things would be accounted insane. And yet, when they take what they affirm to be nearest and dearest to them in the world, and curse it for life, they call *that* love. And so perhaps it is, but love of themselves, not her."

"You have talked too much," says Jemmie. "You are faint, Charlie. You must rest."

"It is a subject that excites me," replies the invalid, "but I must speak of it again with you. I have been praying each day, Jem, that I might go before the

morning. It was selfish of me. I will do so no more. Something tells me now that my life will be spared—just for a little—till you and I have talked of this again."

Mr. Brooke gives him a cordial, and sits by him in silence until the sister relieves him of his watch.

But as he returns to his own room, the words which Charlie has spoken are ringing in his ears.

His chamber looks cool and inviting, and he throws himself upon a couch to think. It adjoins that occupied by the Austins, and after a while, in the stillness of the Eastern afternoon, a sound from the next room falls upon Jemmie's ear. He thinks at first that he must be mistaken, but it comes again and again, until he has no doubt of it, and it is a sound that, in common with most men, he particularly dislikes—that of a woman weeping. He wonders vaguely who it can be. He is not prepared to believe it is Mrs. Austin. But

presently the low cry of "*My God!*" repeated more than once, assures him of her identity, and he rises to his feet, indignant at the idea that she has been insulted or distressed. He is wondering what he can do for her, when he hears another sound, that of a door opening, and a man's step in the room. It is all right then. The major has returned and will console his wife. But the consolation does not appear to be quite of the right sort.

"Is that you, Fanny?" he exclaims. And then, after a pause. "Crying again! By Jove, how long do you expect a man to stand this sort of thing?"

"Oh, Will, dear! Don't be angry," she sobs. "I cannot help it. I feel so miserable and so—so—lonely."

"Complimentary to *me*, my dear."

"You know it's not *that*. I never feel sad when you are here, but those Perrys whisper so whenever I go into the room—and to-day Mrs. Ramsay——"

"Oh, d—n the Perrys!" cries the major emphatically.

"I know it's very silly of me to take any notice of it, Will, and I'm sorry you caught me crying, but——"

"Don't say any more about it, Fan! I ought not to have brought you to a public place like this, but we'll go somewhere else to-morrow."

"No, Will, I don't mean that. It would be unkind to leave poor Mr. Brooke alone with his dying friend, and when he has been so polite to us, too. Never mind the others. I must get used to it, you know."

Austin does not make any reply to this remark, but Jemmie can hear him stamping about the room and swearing under his breath. Presently Mrs. Austin approaches him.

"Kiss me, dearest," she says, "and forgive me."

"There's nothing to forgive, Fan, at

least on *my* side," he replies, "but—but—I wish you wouldn't cry so."

"I will never cry again," she says, with assumed cheerfulness.

"That's right. Try and look it in the face. It can't be undone, you know, and it's no use crying over spilt milk."

"I thought we should be free from it here, at all events," she sighs.

"We shall never be free from it, my dear, at least, in this life," he answers, "so the sooner you make up your mind to it, the better. And after all, the cackle of a lot of old women is beneath your contempt."

"If I could only take my meals in private," she says.

"You had better not. It will attract more notice. No, no; be brave and come down to dinner, and stare them out of countenance. After all, we pay our way, and have as much right to the table d'hote as they have."

There is a mysterious sound after that, as if the major was trying to console his wife with kisses, and then they leave the apartment together. Jemmie lies on his sofa, full of surprise.

He has been quite unable to avoid overhearing the conversation, for the walls of the bed-chambers are pierced for ventilation, but it is all Greek to him. He does not understand *why* Mrs. Austin should object to the public dinner or the remarks of the Perrys. She must be a sillier woman than he took her for, he concludes, if she can mind such trifles and weep over them.

Of one thing he is convinced, however. It is not on account of her husband's behaviour to her that Mrs. Austin is so timid and melancholy. Nothing could be kinder than his manner, and if he is a little impatient over her constant tears, who can blame him?

Jemmie thinks that Gladys' charms

would be somewhat obscured if viewed through a continual mist. The remark he overheard about the Perrys makes him watch these ladies more particularly than he has hitherto done, and he soon perceives indications of the rudeness which Mrs. Austin alluded to.

They certainly do look exceedingly spiteful and disagreeable whenever they glance in the direction of the major's wife, which seems unaccountable to Jemmie, when taken into consideration with her quiet behaviour and amiable manners. Why should they have a dislike to Mrs. Austin, who never troubles them by word or deed. Unless, indeed, it is because she is so much prettier and more refined than themselves.

And, after a while, the Perrys appear to imbue Mrs. Ramsay (a lady in the hotel who was disposed to be very friendly with the Austins) with their prejudices, for she, too, begins to walk the

other way when she sees them approaching, and to pass Mrs. Austin with a cool bow instead of an extended hand. All this worries Mr. Brooke. He wishes his friend's wife had a little more pluck, and would pay these impertinent strangers back in their own coin instead of blushing scarlet whenever they affront her and burying her face in her dinner-plate. He sees there is something wrong, though he cannot tell what it is. But it never makes him relax his own attentions to his new friends.

CHAPTER VI.

"LAST WORDS."

IT is some days before Captain Renton can renew the conversation he commenced with Mr. Brooke. A long spell of faintness comes on, which lasts for several hours, and leaves him too exhausted to speak above a whisper; after which he rallies, and seems to gain a fresh access of strength, as is the nature of his insidious disease. Jemmie has almost forgotten the remarks that passed between them by this time, but Charlie alludes to them of his own accord. Looking up one morning, he says:

"I feel so happy, Brooke! My Alice came to me last night."

"In a dream, you mean," says Jemmie, correcting him.

"No. I am not at all sure it was in a dream. Indeed, I don't think it was. I was lying awake, and she came and stood at the foot of the bed. She looked so beautiful."

Jemmie fully believes this is all his friend's imagination; but he humours him by asking:

"Did she speak to you?"

"Yes. She stood there, for a minute, smiling at me and pointing upwards; so, I said to her: 'Yes, darling! I am coming very soon. It won't be long, now, before we are united again.' She didn't speak aloud, but I saw her lips move, and I could read her answer, 'In the true marriage,' and then she went."

"It was only a dream," says Jemmie, philosophically. "She couldn't have been *really* there you know, old fellow."

Charlie sighs, and looks wistful.

"Perhaps so, Jemmie. The Sister says I am very lightheaded at night. But it is all the same to me, whether I saw her with my spiritual or my material sight. She is waiting for me, I am sure of that, and I long for the moment of reunion."

"What did she mean by 'the true marriage,'" demands Mr. Brooke after a pause.

"The marriage of our souls, Jemmie. What other marriage is there, worthy of the name, either in this world or the next?"

"You take such a very high view of these matters, Renton; it makes it difficult for a fellow like myself to follow you."

"Do I? I think you must misunderstand me. I don't mean that the spiritual union between the sexes is entirely to supersede the material one. Whilst we are men and women that would be impossible. But the lower should be subservient to the higher—the earthly should be under bondage to the heavenly!"

"*Should* be! *Should* be!" repeats Brooke, impatiently. "It's all very fine to say it should be, but when is it?"

"Whenever we love another better than we love ourselves," replies Charlie. "Whenever we place the elevation of our friend above the gratification of our own desires.

"That's all very fine for *you* to say," commences Jemmie, and there stops, conscious of the cruelty of his insinuation.

"You were going to quote the old couplet to me," says the dying man with a faint smile: "'When the Devil was sick, the Devil a monk would be.' But, my dear boy, I have been as hearty and as strong as yourself, and as little a monk as any man in the three kingdoms, and I can remember those days into the bargain. Aye! remember, and regret them."

"You loved, and you married the woman you loved. What is there to regret in that, Charlie, excepting, indeed, that you lost her?"

"I regret that whilst she was mine I did not let my love uplift her to a higher basis —to a more exalted living. It does not signify to her, thank God! because she was removed from my influence to a purer teaching. But *I* shall have to answer for it, Jemmie. You may rest assured of that."

"Well, I think you accuse yourself most unnecessarily, Charlie. I think, too, that your self-reproach is merely an effect of your depressing illness. You loved your wife—according to your own account—like your life. What on earth can any man do more?"

Captain Renton thinks for a few moments, and then replies thoughtfully:

"Every man or woman in this world, Brooke, has the capability of living two lives—of cultivating two characters. One is the interior or hidden life that ripens us for heaven—the other the outward or material existence that fits us for the duties

of earth. Both are necessary to our well-being, though both are not equal in value. It is quite needful, whilst we live amongst our fellow-creatures, that we should have a practical side to our character; without it we should be fools. But it is far more needful that we should cultivate the higher or spiritual nature, that not only makes us a benefit to *this* world, but prepares us for the next."

"Oh! you mean prayers, and all that sort of thing," says Jemmie.

"No, I don't, Jem. I am not speaking now of any religion. The man who holds no creed whatever, and never sees the inside of a church, may still cultivate this higher life and live above the world."

"In a mist of his own creation?"

"No, in a sunny atmosphere that drives all mists before it. In the light of reason —in the strength of a will that can recognise the baseness of its lower nature, and resolve, since *one* must be master, that the

body shall lie down and be subservient to the spirit. Since I have lost my wife, Jemmie, I have come to the conviction that woman was sent into this world to elevate and purify man's baser nature, and that if, instead of trying to bring her down to his level, he would help her to rise above her own she would become his saviour."

"We are always taught to consider them the inferior animals," says Jemmie, laughing.

"Who taught us so, my dear fellow, unless it was ourselves? They are necessary for the gratification of our lower natures, and so we conquer them by our brute force, and say it was the intention of the Almighty that we should be the masters. The nature of a true woman contains all the elements that are lacking in our own. Where we have confidence and courage, which degenerate into lust and rapine, that beautiful instinct which we call modesty makes her shrink from us and

repel us—makes her try to subdue the coarseness of our nature—to temper the fierceness of our passion. Do we let her teach us, or lead us on to higher and better things? You know we do not. You know that, as a rule, we fail to recognise that she possesses the qualities that are wanting in ourselves, or to believe that the Almighty never created us so different in feeling unless He intended the one sex to supply what the other lacks. No, all our aim is to make her feel as we do—to pull her down from her high estate and transform her into a lesser man. We will not be led, nor guided, nor advised. We must have our own way, and, if we don't get it, we become brutes instead of men."

"You would have the women rule us, then?" replies Jemmie, with an air of superiority. "You are an advocate for the shrieking sisterhood's rights, I suppose?"

Captain Renton looks wearily perplexed.

"My dear fellow, if *that* is all the conclusion you draw from my arguments I had better have saved the poor remnant of my breath. No, no! I don't mean that *either* sex should rule the other. I don't see what authority we have for making them unequal. What I want to convey is this: Man is the stronger, more material animal of the two—woman is the weaker, physically, and the most spiritually minded. And I believe she was meant to correct or modify the grosser tendencies of our nature. Let her do her work."

"I am afraid that would end by her getting the whip-hand of us altogether."

"Not at all; for she has love to qualify her chastity. Love, Jemmie—which, compared to ours, is as the light of a silver lamp to the flaring of a tar barrel! Our coarser affections ignite—flame up—splutter and become extinguished, whilst hers go on steadily burning to the end of time. Oh! our love is nothing to a woman's.

We ought not to mention it in the same breath. But, resigned into her hands, it may become as steady as her own."

"You see, you speak only from your remembrance of one very pure and good woman, Charlie. They are not *all* like your Alice. Some pretend to love a man for their own amusement—lead him on—make a fool of him—drive him half mad—and then chuck him over, to do the best he can for himself without them. Those sort of women *ought* to be ruled—crushed—made to do their duty whether they will or no."

"If we knew what *was* their duty," says Charlie thoughtfully; "*my* belief is that, if left to themselves, they would generally do it, for God has given them instincts so fine that we can neither touch nor understand them. When a woman forgets her duty you may be sure that a man has persuaded her to do so, in order that he may gratify himself."

At this unconscious thrust Jemmie rises from his seat, and commences to pace up and down the room.

"I wonder what makes me say all this to you, Brooke," continued the sick man, "for I don't suppose it can interest you?"

"Oh, yes, it does."

"Something has impelled me to speak out as I have done. Perhaps it is the thought of meeting my sweet wife so soon; perhaps the wish to make you some little return for the kindness you have shown a stranger. You are very young, Brooke, and your life is all before you. I don't know if you have loved or not; I don't wish to know; but, if you do, or *when* you do, think of what I have said, and try if my plan will not lengthen out your love into eternity."

Jemmie clears his voice once or twice and then commences to speak, though hurriedly and in a shamefaced manner.

"Look here, old fellow! I suppose you've guessed something; or you wouldn't have talked to me as you have done. I'm deucedly unhappy just now about a woman; I suppose it will blow over; those sort of things generally do; but it's hard to bear at the time, and it's knocked me out of shape. But I don't see how your arguments fit into my case, anyhow. I let her have her own way in everything, and her way has been to curse my whole life by jilting me. And that's what they invariably do if it suits their convenience."

"No chance of your marrying her?" asks Charlie.

"Not the least; she's married already."

"Does she object to your leaving her, then?"

"Oh, dear, no! She sent me flying—with the devil after me."

Captain Renton reads the whole story at a glance. His friend is writhing under

the pain of a disappointed passion. How can he console him?

"I am sure," he says, softly, "she is a good, pure woman, Brooke, or you would not love her so."

"Oh, she's good enough; a little *too* good for me."

"Try to picture her to yourself in the highest extent of her goodness and purity; think of her, not only *as she is*, but as *she might be*. Raise her to the topmost pinnacle a woman can reach, and *then*—if you really love her——"

"*What?*" says Jemmie, with suddenly awakened interest.

"You will try to keep her there. You will try to make the thing you love more and more worthy of your devotion. You will help her to rise. You will put forth all your strength to make that woman the best woman a man ever sighed for. Oh! Brooke! if our love is the powerful feeling we say it is, surely it ought to *raise* its

object, instead of pulling it down to the ground. If you love this woman so intensely you will be her best friend, and not her enemy. You will raise a temple for her and place her in it, sacredly guarded by your love! And, in raising her, you will rise yourself above the temptations of this earth until you cement the spiritual union between you that will last throughout eternity!"

Jemmie answers nothing. He cannot yet enter into the spirit of his friend's theories. They seem to him fanciful, overstrained and ridiculous; the emanations of a weakened, wandering brain; the convictions, arising with the decay of nature, that has lost the power to assert itself.

But they return to him long afterwards when the immortal part of Charlie Renton has passed beyond his sphere of action. To leave the sick chamber for the more bustling part of the hotel is like wandering from a sphere of peace and quiet into one of un-

rest. He finds the Austins in a most perturbed condition. The Perrys and Mrs. Ramsay have cut the major's wife dead when meeting in the corridor, and the landlord has sent an insolent message to her rooms. She has been in hysterics all the morning, and Austin is storming up and down the hotel and swearing in every language he can put his tongue to.

As soon as he sees Jemmie he draws him on one side.

"My dear fellow," he exclaims, "these brutes of women have been making so much mischief in the hotel that we must clear out of it. I'm awfully sorry to leave you, and so for that matter is Fanny, but I cannot subject her to this sort of thing any longer. I smelt mischief directly I found those Perrys were to land at Alexandria."

"What have they done, Austin?"

"Just what their sex always does do directly they get an opportunity. Why are women such devils to one another, Jem?

Why can't they mind their own business, and let other people's alone? What has poor Fan done that they should persecute her so? I'm sure she's quiet enough. But that d—d old woman Perry and her daughters put Mrs Ramsay up to cutting her this morning, and, after that, there's only one thing to be done—to clear out."

"But *why* should they cut Mrs. Austin?" says Jemmie innocently. "I cannot understand it. What grudge have they against her?"

The major looks him steadily in the face.

"Don't you really know, Brooke?"

"I have not the slightest idea. I think she is one of the most amiable and charming women I have ever met with."

"Ah! there you are right," replies Austin sighing. "Poor dear Fan. She's one of the best women that ever stepped in shoe leather. But I made sure you knew all about us. I thought the Perrys, or some

other good Christians on board, were certain to have told you."

"I know nothing at all, Austin. You may take my word for it."

"Well! it doesn't much signify, for it's sure to have come out sooner or later, only I wanted to keep it dark here for Fan's sake. We are not married, Brooke!"

Jemmie is too much a man of the world to be startled at this intelligence, but he cannot help showing a little surprise.

"Indeed," he utters, "I should never have known it."

"Of course we *shall* be," goes on the major hurriedly, "when the divorce is pulled through, you know; but that can't be yet awhile, and I hoped that by bringing Fan out here I might keep it quiet till then. But these cursed women must ferret out everything and make a row about it Look here, Brooke, we've been very friendly together, and I should like to tell you the whole story.

She was Mrs. Messiter, you know, the wife of William Messiter, of Grangely, great hunting man, and all that sort of thing, and nearly double her age. Well, we've known each other for years—Fan and I—and she was deucedly miserable with old Messiter, and so we agreed, one day, that we'd bolt together and try and make a happier life for ourselves. But, by Jove! it hasn't begun yet. I'm very fond of her. You must have seen that."

"Indeed I have. I have often noticed your affection for each other."

"Yes, and she loves me, poor girl. But no love can compensate for the worry and annoyance that follow one in such a life. Women can't stand it, at least, women reared as she has been. It breaks them down altogether. Why, she looks ten years older than she did when she left Grangely, and that's only two months ago. But she's always crying, and living

in a state of fear and suspense, and that ages a woman more than anything else."

"Bad for you, too," says Jemmie laconically.

"I shouldn't mind it for myself, but it's such a nuisance to see her unhappy. It wears one out to encounter nothing but tears all day. I scarcely ever see a smile on her face."

"She'll pick up by-and-bye when she's used to it," replies his friend.

"She'll never get used to it, my dear fellow. High-bred women never do. I don't know if she'll be persuaded to visit England again. She has grown so fanciful, she imagines that everyone she passes in the street knows her story, and that every servant is laughing at her. She has been so frightfully depressed," continues the major, lowering his voice, "that I have been afraid sometimes she would commit suicide."

"Oh! nonsense, Austin, that is impossible."

"You wouldn't say so if you saw her in some of her moods. She left a child at Grangely, and when she thinks of it sometimes she is like a wild creature. She may get tamed down in time, but she will never be the bright, lively woman that I fell in love with."

Jemmie does not know what to answer to this assertion.

"Be warned by me, my dear boy," says the major presently, with his hand upon his arm, "and never go in for this sort of thing. It doesn't pay, Brooke. Women are too sensitive. They care too much for the opinion of the world. They haven't the moral courage, nor the moral strength to make their own lives, and they won't let us make them for them. I am afraid it never answers. They bewail their fate and the loss of what they valued, and we get sick of it just a little sooner than we

should have done if everything had been serene. I love Fan more than I have done any other woman, and I mean to make her my wife as soon as ever the law permits it. But all the same, I should have been wiser to leave her at Grangely."

"And what is this about the landlord?" asks Jemmie.

"Oh! he has given us notice to quit. He cannot have a scandal under his roof. He requests us, in the politest manner in the world, to seek another lodging. *His* house has always borne the most strictly moral character, etc., etc. *Brute!* How I longed to kick him into the middle of next week! And that is the sort of thing that a woman, reared like Fanny, will have to endure. My God! I sometimes feel like putting a bullet through her brain and ending the troubles I have brought on her for ever."

The major turns away with a stifled groan, and Jemmie's heart is full of sym-

pathy for him. And yet, though he pities Austin, he cannot help feeling that he has brought this calamity upon himself Why did he take this woman from her child, and from her home, before he was quite sure that his affection would compensate her for all that she lost? The thought of what he has been told troubles him throughout the rest of the day. He will not go down to the public table. He feels that he could not sit by and see Mrs. Austin insulted without resenting it, and yet, what weapon could he take up in her defence?

Austin, who ought to have been her best protector, has left her without a shield against the world or the pitiless malice of her own sex. Mr. Brooke feels shy also of meeting the wronged woman now that she knows that he has heard her story. She may fancy that he condemns her—and yet to assure her of the contrary would be to insult her more. If he is kinder than usual, in order to try and make up for the

affront she has received, she may imagine he is taking advantage of her defenceless position. In fact, he does not know how to treat her. The only safe course is to avoid her altogether.

Austin has placed her beyond the pale of sympathy or politeness. The one may be construed into impertinence, the other into condemnation. So he strolls out into the town, and passes the evening as best he may, and does not return to the hotel until Mrs. Austin has retired to her room. His pitiful thoughts of her follow him to his own. He cannot shake off the idea of the life that lies before her—a woman who has been lapped in luxury, and never permitted to hear a word that could offend her ear. He is ready to cry "Shame" upon the major for having thought so lightly of the trouble he was bringing on her.

Going to rest with his mind full of Mrs. Austin, it is not wonderful that Jemmie should dream of her—a miserable night-

mare dream from which he wakes with his fair hair bathed in perspiration. He fancies that he sees her, surrounded by an infuriated mob, who spit, and yell, and throw missiles at her, whilst he is powerless to go to her rescue.

She crouches on the ground, with her face hidden in her mantle (like the woman in a celebrated painting he once saw of a scriptural subject), and bends humbly before the storm that beats upon her. He struggles to go to her assistance, but his feet are glued to the ground. He sees the mob closing round her—the cruel mouths gibing at her misfortune—the stones and dirt flying about her kneeling form.

He pants and strains to get at her persecutors. But he is helpless—fettered to the earth. The sweat runs down his limbs with the exertions that he makes—the foam drops from his lips—each separate hair seems to stand upon his head. It is all in vain. The pitiless nightmare holds him

there—rivetted where he stands—and the kneeling figure crouches closer to the ground.

On come her assailants—nearer—nearer—the missiles strike her upon every side. She raises her pale, tear-stained face, with meek deprecation of their wrath.

God in Heaven! It is not Mrs. Austin! It is Gladys Mountcarron. The shock of the discovery breaks the spell that binds him in sleep, and Jemmie starts up, trembling all over and with a new light bursting in upon his mind.

For the first time he sees clearly what he has escaped—what she has escaped by refusing to throw in her lot with his. He leaps from his bed, and walks up and down the room to assure himself that he is awake, that he is capable of understanding this new thought that has come to him.

Ever since he left Carronby, he has tried hard to put Gladys altogether out of his

mind. He has fought against his passion for her, like a young tiger plunging to break his way out of a snare. He has denied it to himself—he has ridiculed it, stamped on it, raved at it, but he has known nevertheless that it was *there*, and that no cards nor billiards, nor dissipation, nor brandies and sodas, nor gin cocktails, could ever have the power to make him forget it—even for a moment.

But he has never regarded it in the light that it now appears to him. Even in listening to the recital of Mrs. Austin's wrongs, he has only blamed the major. It has never occurred to him that he would have acted precisely in the same way, if Fate had not interposed her finger to prevent it. But he sees it now. His dream has revealed to him what no argument could have opened his eyes to, and his first intelligible words are: "Thank God! that it *is* a dream."

He has scarcely come to this conclusion

when a gentle tapping takes him to the door.

It is the Sister of Mercy, come to summon him to the bedside of Captain Renton.

"Come quick, sir. I cannot stay. He is dying."

Jemmie is in the sick man's chamber almost as soon as she is. Charlie is lying perfectly still on his pillows, almost pulseless and with fast glazing eyes.

"When did this happen?" asks Jemmie.

"Just after twelve, sir, but he's been sinking all the day. I told you he couldn't last long when you bid him good-night."

"True, but I did not think it would be so soon as this, or I would have remained up with him."

"It was impossible to tell, sir. It might have been to-morrow just as well as to-day. It's always sudden at the last. But he

has been very quiet. He has wanted for nothing."

"Charlie, old man, do you know me?" says Jemmie, in a husky voice.

The dying man's eyelids stir, and a faint smile flickers over his cold lips.

"It will soon be over, dear old fellow. You are going to Alice, you know. You will soon be with her now," continues Jemmie, in his anxiety to comfort the last moments of his friend.

Charlie lifts his wasted hand and points feebly to the foot of the bed.

"Alice—*there*," he gasps, and then turning to Jemmie with a last effort he continues:

"*Yours*—don't desert—be her friend—her friend—higher—her friend!"

He fixes his eyes upon him, and Jemmie waits for him to speak again. But they are his last words. As they watch his face they see a pale grey mist come down and steal across it like a veil of gauze—a mist

that touches the eyes and extinguishes their light—that encircles the mouth and makes its corners droop.

A faint, cold breath comes and goes once or twice upon the fallen lips, and then, with one long-drawn sigh, the limbs relax, and Charlie Renton's spirit has escaped beyond the confines of its earthly prison.

"It is over," says the nurse calmly; "he has gone."

Jemmie does not need a second assurance. He has read the truth for himself, and, with one grasp of the dead hand, he walks out of the chamber and returns to his own. With Captain Renton's death his work in Alexandria is concluded. The Austins leave the day after, and he only remains long enough to see the funeral properly conducted, and despatch his friend's personal effects to England. After which he writes thus to Lady Renton: "Perhaps you will expect, now the business

on which I came out here is over, that I shall return home; but I have no intention of doing so just yet. My cure is not completed. It has only just begun. I have decided, therefore, to go on to India, and spend a few months in Calcutta and Bombay. When it grows too hot for me to remain there, I can easily take steam to Australia, or come home by long sea, which will enable me to visit the Cape. Anyway, you must do without me for awhile. When I feel I am *man* enough to return, and take up my position at Nutley without any fear of falling into my former weakness, I will do so. And the time will come. A new light has broken in upon me. I begin to see all things differently, and the day may yet dawn, dear Elinor, when you will have no cause to be ashamed of your loving brother, JEMMIE."

CHAPTER VII.

"THE COUNTESS."

MAY has arrived, and Cardigan Place has put on a holiday garb to welcome the advent of Lady Mountcarron, who is to spend a week with her parents, preparatory to taking up her residence in her town-house for the season.

Her husband comes with her, but he is quite a secondary consideration. An earl may be put anywhere—in the attics, if he is a bachelor, and there is no better accommodation for him; but a countess is quite a different matter. The honours of a coronet all fall in the female line, and Mrs. Fuller could not have taken more trouble to make her house fit to receive the Countess of Mountcarron if Gladys had

been an utter stranger to her, instead of her own child. *She* is about to have her "innings" now in the aristocratic marriage she helped to make. The neighbours will see the coronetted carriage standing at her door each afternoon, and crane their necks over the dining-room blinds to see *her* daughter, Lady Mountcarron, step in or out of it.

And she is resolved that Gladys shall not be ashamed of her old home. So the balconies and windows teem with scented blossoms and glossy leaves, and the house has been fitted with new æsthetic blinds, and the lace curtains are from the most expensive foreign looms. The guest chambers have been refurnished also and made fit for the reception of so great a personage, and the servants have been ordered to assume their new liveries.

It is amusing sometimes to watch the sudden dignity gained in the family circle by an accession of rank or riches. Gladys,

who but two short years ago was in the schoolroom, and scolded by her mother if she wore her best dresses upon ordinary occasions, who slept in one of the smallest apartments of the house, and was highly delighted when her father sent her a couple of sovereigns for a birthday present, nothing is too good now for Gladys, for whom at that period anything was good enough.

Mrs. Prendergast, though she is the eldest daughter, cannot compete with her titled sister. If Winnie and Maurice should happen to visit the Fullers during Gladys' stay, they must occupy the deserted nursery, for nothing can be permitted to entrench upon the comfort of the earl and countess. It is close upon the time when these important people may be expected, and Mrs. Fuller is walking from room to room, followed by her upper-housemaid, to see that none of her orders have been neglected, whilst the general paces up and down the

library carpet, stopping short every now and again, as wheels pass the door, in hopes that they may stop before it.

He is looking forward, almost with the expectation of youth, to this meeting with his favourite daughter. He has not seen her since they parted in October, and the time has appeared very long. He has missed her bright face, so painfully, from his domestic hearth. He has missed all her winning, loving ways, missed even the naughty wilfulness that made her so often act directly in opposition to his wishes. Winnie is a good daughter to him. He loves Winnie, and he respects her. But she never can fill the place in his heart —even in the slightest degree—left vacant by his beautiful Gladys. As for the cubs—well, of course the cubs belong to him, and he supposes that some day they may turn out comforts. But to compare his affection for the cubs to his affection for Gladys, or to hint that they could (in anywise) fill the

void created by her absence, would be only to render those young gentlemen a little more objectionable in his eyes than they are at present. No; Gladys is his favourite child—there is no doubt of that—and Gladys' welfare, and Gladys' happiness, are the absorbing interests of his existence. A lover could scarcely wait the arrival of his mistress with greater expectation than this fond father waits the arrival of his child, and anticipates the moment when he shall hold her in his arms.

At last she comes. The solid walls have shut out the sound of her carriage wheels, and she is on the threshold, and clasped to his heart, before he knows that she has entered the house. For several minutes they hold each other fast. Lady Mountcarron does not cry, but General Fuller hears her rapid breathing, and knows how much she feels in their reunion.

"My darling dad!" she exclaims, at last, just in the old, fond way, "my dearest,

precious old dad. Are you really glad to have your own girl back again?"

No need for her dad to answer. He holds her against her heart, with his lips pressed against her fair forehead, and blinks off the tell-tale tears that have risen to his eyes as welcome. And then the mother bustles in followed by Lord Mountcarron, and a family greeting ensues.

"How are you, Mountcarron?" says the general, holding out a hand to his son in-law. "Very glad to see you. And thank you for bringing this dear child to us first. It is the greatest pleasure you could have given us."

"We have to thank you for the invitation," replies the earl, "and I hope it will do Gladys good to visit her old home, for she has been anything but well lately."

"Not well, my darling! Why, what is the matter?" cry both the parents, anxiously.

"Nothing, indeed, mother. Mountcarron

is fidgetty without a cause. All I needed was a little change, and *this* change most of all. O, how good it is to find myself at home again. You won't get rid of me the whole week, father dear. I mean to sit in your lap all day long."

Her father laughs at her for a great baby, but her mother's mind is not to be so easily diverted from the question of her illness.

"But now I look at you, dear Gladys, you are very, *very* thin! Your husband is right. You are *not* well. Why, what has become of your figure, my dear? How terribly you have fallen away!"

"Indeed, mother, it's your imagination, or it is this dress, which never fitted me properly. You've been feasting your eyes on Winnie during my absence, and dad has been feasting his eyes on you, and you forget that I was always one of the 'lean kine,' and never plump and satisfactory like yourselves."

"You were slight, my darling, but now you are positively *thin*," repeats Mrs. Fuller, "and your face looks smaller than it was to me. I hope that Carronby agrees with you?"

"It agrees with me perfectly. It is the most charming place in all the world," cries Gladys, with affected enthusiasm, "and if I am a little thinner than usual, it is because I have ridden about the country so much lately. And now, mother, may I go to my room and rest? Darling dad," flying across the library to kiss him once more before she leaves, "I shall see you again at dinner."

General Fuller is regarding her gravely, and a fear strikes Gladys lest he should guess that she is not happy. The cunning instinct of her sex comes to her rescue. She turns to the earl, and lays her hand familiarly upon his shoulder.

"How do you think Mountcarron is looking, dad?" she asks archly. "*He* is

not thin, at all events. I have taken good care of him, have I not?"

And with that Gladys smiles in her husband's face—a smile given wholly for her father's sake—but which does its work admirably, and sets the minds of all assembled at ease. But when the Countess rejoins them in her dinner dress, the "falling away," of which her mother spoke, is painfully apparent. She has always been a slight, lissom girl, but now she is positively attenuated. There is a feverish light in her eyes, too, and a bright crimson spot burning on either cheek, which her father, who has all the anxiety of a mother for her, does not like to see. Her spirits, too, are boisterously high and very uncertain. She will rattle on about the greatest nonsense for a few minutes, and then suddenly sink into a silence which is almost depressive. Which moods, when broken in upon, seem to be depths of thought, from which Lady Mountcarron

drags herself back with the utmost difficulty, to recommence her hollow laughter and her somewhat questionable jokes. Once or twice she detects the general's eye fixed on her with a sort of questioning gravity, that sends her tongue on at railroad speed, as she consults Mrs. Fuller concerning various arrangements for the house in Berkeley Square, and descants on the big parties she intends to give there, and the people she ought and ought not to invite for her afternoon teas.

"I am to be presented at the first Drawing-Room by Mountcarron's aunt, the Duchess of Downshire, mamma," she continues vapidly. "Worth has had my robe in hand for two months past. It is all white and silver, embroidered by hand, but is sure to be in good taste, whatever it may be. And the dress for the court ball is composed entirely of feathers. From Worth's description of it, I shall look like nothing but an ostrich without a tail. He

is making three or four other costumes for me, but I shall not get them till later in the season."

"I hope you will not *over do* it, my dear," says her father anxiously. "She is not strong, Mountcarron. You must remember that, and put a little restraint upon her dissipations."

The earl laughs good-temperedly—but without the least concern for his wife's probable illness.

"My dear general, she does exactly as she pleases, and I have no more control over her than over a three-year-old filly that's never been backed. Ask her if it isn't true. She used to run over Carronby just as she liked, and now she'll run over London just as she likes, and the devil himself won't stop her.

"But I think you *ought* to regulate her vagaries a little. Gladys is very young still, and apt to over-estimate her capabilities."

"My dear dad, I wish you wouldn't speak in that disrespectful way of a married woman of twenty," cries Lady Mountcarron with affected displeasure. "And it's a funny thing to begin talking of restraint at the beginning of the season. What will you recommend before it's over? Why, my engagement list is filled up to the first week in June. And there are twelve private balls amongst the invitations. Oh! how I have looked forward to the balls," she goes on feverishly, "it seems such a time since I danced. I think I must have almost forgotten how to do it."

She looks up with glowing eyes and cheeks at her father, as she concludes the sentence.

"Ah! you'll miss Jem at the balls, won't you Gladys?" says Mountcarron, with his mouth full.

General Fuller sees the blood recede from her young face like a wave of crimson, leaving it grey as ashes. Instinctively he

turns his eyes away. "Do you mean Mr. Brooke?" he inquires of the earl, although he knows well enough who he means.

"Yes; my cousin Jem. He and Gladys were great chums at Carronby. He taught her to ride, and, by Jove! he taught her well. She's quite a horsewoman?"

"And is not Mr. Brooke coming up for the season then?"

"He can't, poor fellow. He's been called off to Alexandria to look after some connection of Lady Renton's, who's dying. And I don't suppose he'll die in time to let Jem come back—at least, Elinor says so. But it's hard lines for Jem."

It seems to be "hard lines" for Lady Mountcarron also, if one may judge from the way in which she changes colour, from white to red, during this conversation, and the fluttering movements of her hands, and the quick, nervous glances she gives up and down the dinner table. Mrs. Fuller notices her daughter's agitation, as well as

her husband, and she interprets it better. The general is only surprised. It would wound him to the quick were any one to suggest to him that Gladys could exhibit such visible emotion for the sake of any man other than her husband. But his wife knows the world, and the ways of the fashionable women thereof. She suspects at once that Gladys feels more than a friendly interest in the movements of young Brooke, and it does not shock her, more's the pity! She does not imagine for a moment that her daughter would be such a fool as to imperil her coronet by doing more than indulge in a harmless flirtation with her husband's cousin, and she thinks it is very natural that she should do so, moped in the solitude of those stupid woods at Carronby. Only she doesn't quite like those blushes which have betrayed her secret, and she is intensely curious to know how far the intimacy has proceeded, and whether Gladys' altered looks have anything to do

with the missing Mr. Brooke. Mrs. Fuller does not venture to question Gladys herself upon the subject. However carelessly women may think of such lapses from the strict path of propriety, they seldom go to the fountain head for information. But she confides in Winnie—Winnie, who is as much in Cardigan Place as at her own house during the ensuing week. She takes an early opportunity to draw her elder daughter aside, and ask her if she has not observed the alteration in her sister's looks and manner.

"She's a perfect skeleton Winnie, and then, you know, those spirits of hers are not natural. One minute shaking with laughter, almost hysterical, and the next as silent and depressed as if she had just come from a funeral. And do you observe how her colour varies? I don't like it, my dear. I am dreadfully afraid she is going to be ill."

"Poor darling Gladys," observes Mrs.

Prendergast compassionately, "what can be the matter with her? I did not think her looking well at Christmas; you may remember that I told you as much, mama; but it is nothing compared to what she is now. And yet she never seems to be fatigued."

"Ah! my dear, all that running about is very bad for her, take my word for it. She only does it for the sake of excitement. And it doesn't give her an appetite, for she eats nothing. If it were not that she and Mountcarron are evidently on the best of terms, I should really think that the dear child was unhappy."

At this suggestion Winnie draws in her horns. These girls love their mother, but it is the love born of association, not of esteem. They dare not tell her the smallest thing without the dread of hearing it repeated, and, as a *confidante*, they are afraid of her. Mrs. Prendergast remembers vividly the scenes that took place at Carronby

during her Christmas visit, and the fears which she could not help entertaining for her sister; but she would not tell her mother of them for all the world. On the contrary, she would do her best to draw her mind away from such a suspicion; and, with this end in view, she stoops to a little pardonable subterfuge.

"On the best terms, mother? I should think so. I can see nothing to find fault with in their behaviour towards each other. Indeed, I believe that Gladys has grown quite fond of her husband, and something she told me at Carronby convinces me I am right. I remember distinctly her saying she wasn't tired of her bargain. I am sure it can only be her state of health that makes her unlike herself. She is quite happy with Mountcarron."

"I am truly thankful to hear it," replies Mrs. Fuller; "for though most women would consider themselves amply remunerated for marrying by wearing a coronet,

Gladys is young and foolishly romantic, and might fret if she got nothing more."

"My dear mother, surely you are forgetting," exclaims Winnie. "Gladys romantic? Why, she was always the most practical girl in the world, and was fully capable of weighing the advantages of her marriage against its possible shortcomings. Oh! dear, no! She is perfectly satisfied with her position, and we may be satisfied too."

"Certainly, my dear; and no one feels prouder of the alliance she has made than myself. But do you know why Mr. Brooke, the earl's cousin—you remember, that fair young man that we saw so much of last season—has not come to town with them?"

Winnie feels as if she were caught in a trap. She has had her suspicions concerning Mr. Brooke, and the close intimacy between him and her sister, but she would not share them with her mother for a

queen's ransom. She is not a clever woman, but all women are clever enough to deceive when it suits their purpose to do so. And Winnie loves Gladys very dearly.

"*Brooke*," she repeats, with knitted brows; "Do you mean Lady Renton's brother?"

"Of course. Wasn't he living at Carronby when you stayed there? He seemed a fixture in the autumn."

"Oh! dear, no! I think he called once or twice, during my visit, or his sister did, which amounts to the same thing. But he wasn't stopping in the house, certainly not; though I believe he and Lady Renton dined there on Christmas-Day. But what of him?"

"That's just what I want to ask *you*, my dear. What of him? I was very much surprised, when his name was mentioned at dinner the other day, to see your sister become scarlet. I hope there's nothing between them, Winnie."

"Nothing between them, mother! What *do* you mean?"

"Nothing wrong, my dear. Certainly not. Is it likely I should try to defame the character of my own child, or that Gladys would forget what is due to her position as a countess? Only girls will be thoughtless, you know, and he certainly is a very handsome young man, and if there *had* been a flirtation between them——"

"My *dear* mother," cries Mrs. Prendergast, visibly distressed, "*pray* put such an idea completely out of your head. Consider what a terrible thing it would be if it came round to Mountcarron's ears, or even to Gladys'. I assure you—*solemnly*—there is nothing of the kind. My sister likes Mr. Brooke well enough. He is a pleasant, amiable young fellow, and a great favourite with the earl. But as to anything like a flirtation—why, you ought to know Gladys better. She is as cold as ice with men. Don't you remember how methodically she

weighed the pros and cons for accepting Mountcarron, and how blissfully indifferent she proved herself on that occasion to anything like love-making between them? I love my sister, mother, dearly, but coldness is her fault, and you and I both know it."

"Yes, she certainly was indifferent on *that* occasion," says Mrs. Fuller, with emphasis. "But I don't like her visible agitation when this young gentleman's name is mentioned, nor the feverish, uncertain way in which she seems to be acting, and when I couple it with his absence ——"

"Please don't couple it with anything, mother, but ascribe it to its true cause—Gladys' love of self. She is in town now for the first time as Lady Mountcarron, and people are calling on her and flattering her every day. And with the prospect of the presentation before her, and the Court Ball, and all the gaieties of the season, I don't wonder at her worldly little head being turned. If she had a dear baby, like my

Arthur, to love and look after, she wouldn't think anything of such nonsense."

"Ah, my dear, that will come. All in good time," says Mrs. Fuller, wagging her head oracularly, with unswerving belief in the capabilities of her daughters.

But although the subject of Mr. Brooke is dropped for the present, Winnie is much afraid she has only "scotched" the scandal, and not killed it, and she watches anxiously lest Gladys should display any further signs of betraying herself. For her own heart is full of doubt and fear for her. She cannot forget what she saw and heard at Carronby —the ardent looks she intercepted—the occasional *têtes-à-tête* she came upon—the disappointment written on each young face when a third person broke in upon their interviews. Jemmie and Gladys had not dreamt they were disclosing the secret they hardly dared to breathe to one another to the world. But it was patent, nevertheless, to the eyes of those that loved them, and

Mrs. Prendergast feels certain—although she so steadfastly denies it—that her sister's manner is entirely due to the fact of Mr. Brooke's absence. She hopes and trusts that Gladys has seen her folly, and is trying to forget him; but she watches her, nevertheless, only waiting for the opportunity to gain her confidence and strengthen her resolve.

Meanwhile the earl and countess remove to their house in Berkeley Square, and the festivities of the season begin. Ball succeeds ball, and dinner succeeds dinner, and the days are filled up with boating-parties, garden-parties, lawn-tennis parties, and afternoon receptions.

As soon as her Court duties are concluded, Gladys rushes from place to place —feverishly happy outwardly—intensely miserable at heart; but resolved to dance, and to dine, and to flirt, until she has danced, and dined, and flirted Jemmie Brooke back to his old position of friend

and cousin, and freed herself from the bonds in which he has entangled her. Never was there a more enthusiastic pleasure-seeker than the beautiful Lady Mountcarron—never a hostess more sought after, and followed, and admired—never a more consistent worshipper at Folly's fane! And yet she grows more hollow-eyed and hectic-looking every day. Strangers who see her for the first time, vote her beautiful, but add: "How very delicate she looks!" Her father and her sister remonstrate with her on her reckless disregard of health and strength, but still she rushes on her wild career, allowing herself no time for rest, or thought, or retrospection. The fact is, Gladys, who did not find her love strong enough to outbalance the advantages of her position, is indignant that the unwelcome intruder refuses to accept the fiat of banishment which she passed upon it, and keeps its place, regardless of her wishes or her feelings. She cannot stamp it out—

nor tread it out, nor drive it out. There it remains, through dances, and dinners, and drives—indelibly seated on its throne of light—a glorious radiance shed amidst the gloomy surroundings of her artificial life. The poor child loves at last—loves in the strongest, bitterest, gladdest sense of the word—loves for ever.

The loss of her lover has opened her eyes to the full gain, the grand necessity of love.

Jemmie has left her, but his image is indelibly engraven on her memory, and she would give all that she possesses to recall him. She knows now that she cannot live without the thing that she once jeered at—the religion she blasphemed—the idol she desecrated. Just as the shrine is deserted, and the temple laid bare, she discovers, without chance of self-deception, that her life is nothing to her without love.

And since she cannot have it—since she

has passed it by, and bartered her birthright for a mess of pottage—she will kill it or she will kill herself. And that is the thought that sends the lovely Lady Mountcarron rushing through the season like a tornado, that devastates and wrecks the wounded heart from which it springs. At last Winnie is really alarmed for her. Her parents are also alarmed, but they dare not speak openly, and they do not know what to speak about. Winnie is braver—knowledge makes her strong—and she resolves to question her sister, and learn the reason of her strange behaviour.

She catches Gladys one afternoon too tired at last to fulfil her engagements, and safe, for a few hours, from the intrusion of strangers.

The countess is very glad to see her sister. Her feverish little hand twines itself round Winnie's lovingly, and her plaintive, innocent-looking eyes gaze into her face with a silent appeal for sym-

pathy and affection. Mrs. Prendergast takes a seat by her couch, and determines to come to the point with her.

"What a long time it is since you have been here, Winnie," commences Gladys.

"My dear child! What is the use of my coming when you are never at home? I have no time to spare for bootless errands, Gladys."

The countess looks down.

"You are quite right. I am very seldom to be seen. But it is not my fault. We have so many engagements."

"That is nonsense, my dear. There is no occasion for you to ruin your health, and make yourself talked about, just because you receive more invitations than you can conveniently accept."

'*Talked about!*" exclaims Gladys.

"Certainly. Don't you think people talk when they see a young married lady like you 'rushing' your first season as if

you were taking a fence, and growing more and more like a ghost each day."

"A very substantial ghost," says Gladys, with a smile that shows the hollows in her cheeks.

"I don't think so, my dear! I think you are making yourself positively ill, and that Mrs. Grundy is very apt to surmise there must be some hidden motive for this extreme excitement on your part. It is not natural that a girl like you should not sometimes wish to spend a quiet evening at home with her husband."

Gladys grows red and shrugs her shoulders.

"Oh, as for that, everyone knows Mountcarron is not 'a family man,' and when he spends his evenings at the club, where should I go but into society? It is nothing out of the way. Everyone does it."

"But you are not strong enough to do it, Gladys, and you do not enjoy it into the

bargain. Anyone can see that. Now what is the use of wasting your strength on amusements that you care nothing for?"

"I must do *something*," says Gladys in a low voice, "or I shall go mad."

"My dear sister. May I speak openly to you?"

"Have you ever asked me for that permission before, Winnie?"

"No, but I have never felt inclined to speak to you so seriously before. I think I know all about it, darling. I am not blind, and I could not help seeing and guessing a great deal at Christmas. You are unhappy about Mr. Brooke—are you not? You have allowed yourself to get too fond of him, and now that he has gone away you are fretting over his absence. Tell me, dear Gladys. You know I do not ask you for the sake of curiosity. But if I can help, or advise, or comfort you, tell me all about it, and ease your overburdened heart."

And for all answer, Lady Mountcarron throws herself suddenly into her sister's arms, saying:

"Oh, Jemmie—*my* Jemmie; I shall die without him!"

Winnie is not quite prepared for this frank and passionate outburst.

She thought that her sister, little by little perhaps, would permit the truth to be drawn from her—might confess with a few tears, half mingled with conscious smiles—that she *had* overstepped the bounds of prudence, and allowed the companionship of her husband's cousin to usurp too large a portion of her interest.

But this vehement, and unreserved declaration—this agonised cry of love, and from the lips of her worldly, calculating Gladys—strikes Winnie with dismay. It is a revelation. It discloses an amount of feeling of which she has never supposed her sister to be capable, and Mrs. Prendergast recognises it at once.

Here is a love deeper than any she has experienced herself — a pain from which she has never suffered, and she respects while she condemns it. As Lady Mountcarron throws herself into her arms, and begins to sob upon her bosom, Mrs. Prendergast presses her closely to her heart, and whispers words of comfort into her ear.

"My sweetest Gladys! My own darling sister. Let me be your *confidante* and your adviser."

"Oh, Winnie! You will never, *never* tell?"

"*Tell*, my dearest! How can you think me capable of such a thing?"

"Not even to mother, and to dad—especially not to dad?"

"Not to anyone. I will not even breathe it to myself, once it has passed your lips. Only speak out, my darling, or your heart will break."

And Winnie is right. The hearts that

cannot tell their trouble break. Many good people (*so-called*) would resent the confidence she has just asked for, and affirm, that if anything so shameful and immoral as a married woman loving another man but her husband has occurred, she should lock the terrible secret in her own breast, and let it feed upon her lonely heart, as the vulture fed upon the vitals of Prometheus.

But good people (*so-called*), although meaning well, perhaps (according to their lights), are sometimes very wrong, and help to further the very evil they condemn.

"Give sorrow words——"

The young especially, must have it so, else in their inexperience of trouble they may imagine that the grief that possesses them can never find a cure, and so, despairing, make no effort to overcome it.

Gladys has been nursing her sorrow for weeks and months, and it is feeding on her.

By day it walks by her side, at night it haunts her restless dreams. Jemmie seems always in her sight, either in his youthful happiness and triumph, or in his despair. She cannot get rid of him, and the more he makes her wretched, the more she loves him. She has begun to believe that she will carry this burden with her to the grave, that nothing will free her from it, that she is cursed for ever.

Her sister's plain speaking is the very solace that she needs. It has come in the nick of time, to save her from a brain fever, induced by silent brooding on her lot.

When Winnie urges her to speak out, she begins to cry heartily, and Winnie cries with her. Her tears do her good. They disfigure her pretty face, but they lighten the heavy load pressing on her brain, and throughout her fit of weeping her sister can detect the low murmured cry for "*Jemmie.*"

"You will not despise me, Winnie, if I tell you everything," she says at length, lifting her blistered face from the shelter of her sister's bosom.

"My own darling! How can you ask me such a question? I could never despise you, Gladys, even if you committed every crime of which you are capable."

"We loved each other so," continues the younger girl, with downcast eyes, and trembling lips. "I think we must have loved each other from the very first, and at last he told me so—or I guessed it—you know, I couldn't help guessing it, Winnie—but I never thought that it would lead to anything else. But—but——"

"Well, love?"

"Oh, Winnie, it is so hard to tell, and then you may blame him, and indeed, he was not so much to blame as I."

"Shall I guess it for you, Gladys? He grew too bold and confident, knowing your love for him (men always do), and so he

offended you, and you were compelled to order him to go."

"Oh, no, no!" exclaims Gladys, feverishly anxious to defend her absent hero. "He was not bold—he never offended me. He only asked me to go away with him (it was very natural, you know, Winnie), and I—I wanted to go, only—only——"

"Only your better nature asserted itself, Gladys, and you thought of your poor father and mother, and of your sister, who would have broken their hearts if anything had happened to you."

Lady Mountcarron nods her head affirmatively.

"Yes, yes, that was it; but I feel as if it would kill me."

"It will not kill you, dearest. You must rouse yourself and be strong, and regard this matter in its true light. You have been a dear brave girl, and you will not do your work by halves. Where is Mr. Brooke now?"

But this is too much for Gladys' fortitude. At the mention of his name she breaks down again, and can only sob out:

"I — I — don't know. Oh! Jemmie! Jemmie! He may be ill — he may be dying—for want of me, and—I—I sent him away! Winnie, sometimes I think that I cannot bear it—that I must go after him!"

At this declaration Mrs. Prendergast becomes really alarmed.

"Gladys, you are mad! You cannot think of what you are saying. *What!* give up your title and your position in society—ruin your whole life, in fact, and for a passing fancy? Oh! my dear sister, swear to me, swear to me before Heaven! that you will *never* think of such a wicked thing again."

"Don't be frightened," says Gladys faintly, "there is no need. I gave him up when I would have died for him, because—because — of my name and all

the rest of it, and I am not likely to forget it for the second time. It is all over between us, indeed it is. Everything is over for both of us. But you mustn't blame me for making the most of the position for which I resigned him and—and—my love."

Winnie draws a long breath of relief.

"I felt sure you must be jesting," she says. "It would be too utterly terrible a thing to happen in our family. But you will never put yourself in the way of temptation again, Gladys, will you?"

"No, never!" replies Gladys.

"And you will take more care of your health, for all our sakes? You must not fatigue yourself so much. You must——"

Her sister interrupts her eagerly.

"Ah! Winnie, stop there. I cannot promise anything further. Don't you see that going out is the only means I have of trying to forget? Do you know what it is?" she continues plaintively, "to hear

one voice only, whoever speaks to you—to see one pair of eyes, whoever looks at you—to feel your heart stop every time your memory rushes back to it? Oh! Winnie, I do suffer so—I do suffer so! I would give every drop of my heart's blood to see him once again, if only for an hour."

"And what would be the good of that?" says Winnie practically, "when it would only make the separation between you harder? It is the best thing for you that he has had the sense to go away, Gladys, and I only hope that he may stay away and that you may never see him again."

"Oh! you are cruel! you are very cruel!" murmurs Lady Mountcarron.

"My dearest sister, try to look at the matter from a practical point of view. What good can come from your meeting Mr. Brooke again? None! *He* knows it, if you do not, and the course he has adopted has raised him considerably in

my estimation. Besides, you must think of Mountcarron. He may begin to suspect the reason of your behaviour, as I did, and then you know what would follow. He would not prove to be so sympathetic a *confidante* as I have done."

"*Mountcarron!*" repeats Gladys, in a voice of contempt. "As if *Mountcarron* ever troubled himself about what I do, or how I look or feel. He is too much wrapt up in himself to think of me."

"I wish you would tell me exactly the terms you are on with your husband," says Winnie, reflectively. "You seem all right, to me—in public."

"O, yes; we're all right in public, and some people might think we were all right in private, as well. He never finds fault with anything I say or do. He is never jealous of any other man, and he generally notices when I put on a new dress, and tells me if I look well in it. Sometimes—on very special occasions—he cocks his head

on one side, and after examining me carefully, says: 'By Jove! you're an uncommonly pretty creature, Gladys, upon my soul you are.' After which compliment I am condemned to endure a certain amount of love-making, by which his lordship gives vent to his overcharged feelings of admiration. And there I think it ends. Excepting, of course, that I have a liberal allowance of pin-money—much more than I can use—and my own way in most things,"

"And what on earth can you want more?" asks Winnie.

"*Love*, Winnie! *love*, which he has never given me, and never will."

"He admires you tremendously."

"O, yes; he admires me."

"And he is proud of you. He was saying so to father, only the other day."

"Yes; I believe he is proud of me."

"And don't such things constitute love?"

"No," says Lady Mountcarron.

"You have grown very wise, my dear."

"I know it. I have had a good teacher," she says, biting her lips.

"And yet you used to laugh at love, and call it ridiculous. O, Gladys; how you used to laugh, and declare it was all sentimental nonsense, and you were not that sort of girl at all."

"Ah, Winnie, do not remind me of those days. I have been so sorely punished for them. I have washed all their folly out with tears. Listen to me, dear. I am going to be all that you wish me. Neither you, nor dad, shall ever blush for me. Only don't try to persuade me that Mountcarrow loves me, for it isn't true, I do not complain of him, remember. I married him without love, and I do not want it—*from him.* We are just wholly and totally indifferent to one another. He has got a wife, and I—a title. The debt is paid on both sides, and there is nothing more to be said about it. But all our tastes and sympathies are diverse one from the other."

"Are not the tastes and sympathies of all men and women so?"

"Mine and Jemmie's were not."

"Ah, Gladys; that is forbidden ground. You must not think of it."

"I shall never cease to think of it, not till I die. I was not strong enough to give up the world for him. Still less am I strong enough to forget him. It will be my curse to remember him—for the rest of my life."

"If you regard your sacrifice in this spirit, dear, you will never be safe."

"What other spirit can I regard it in?"

Winnie cannot tell her. She knows nothing or has thought nothing of that higher life of spiritual communion which Charlie Renton pointed out to Jemmie. She is trembling, not for her sister's moral degradation, but for her threatened social losses. When she contemplates Gladys' danger, she pictures, not a young soul compelled by force of circumstances to sink, instead of rising, but a countess

stripped of her title, an open scandal, and a life-long separation.

Could she have told Gladys the right spirit in which to regard her parting with her lover, she might have set her feet at once upon that upward path, which he is learning painfully to ascend.

But it is not in her power to do so. All she can answer is :

"Try to be grateful for the fearful gulf you have escaped, and to look upon Mr. Brooke as the would-be betrayer of your innocence, and the worst enemy you have ever had."

But Winnie undoes half her work with this ill-advised suggestion.

"I cannot do it," cries Gladys wildly. "I will never do it. I shall think of him to the last day of my life as the dearest and best friend I ever had. Oh, Winnie! you do not understand me. No one does! Let me go on with my balls and theatres, and garden parties. They are kinder to me

than you are. They leave me no time to think. But—when I *have* time—it shall be all his—every moment of it shall be his."

And so Mrs. Prendergast returns home, not over satisfied with the result of her visit. She has gained her sister's confidence, but she has proved quite incapable of shaking her resolution either one way or the other.

CHAPTER VIII.

NEWS FROM CALCUTTA.

LADY MOUNTCARRON goes on in her own way without heed of consequences, and grows thinner and paler as the season advances. It is true that she flushes a lovely crimson at night, and that her spirits are often wildly hilarious; but she droops terribly by day, and can scarcely drag her limbs after her. Yet she is indefatigable as a dancer and lawn-tennis player, and has soon gained herself the reputation of a flirt amongst her own sex. Women cannot bear to see each other admired or sought after. If one amongst them gains a little more attention than the rest, that one is certain to be picked to pieces, scandalised and depreciated. And

Gladys is too pretty and too popular to escape calumny. Her heart is far away from every scene in which she mingles. The poor child is fighting a terrible battle with herself, and drawing blood at every thrust, but what does that signify to the jealous idiots, who see only that she is the best-looking woman wherever she goes? She is so witty too, and *spirituelle*, that she is a general favourite; the men enjoy her conversation quite as much as they adore her beauty. The earl seems neither to know nor to care how his wife is amusing herself. He is seldom seen with her; never indeed, except at a dinner, or a theatre. The places where she is in most need of protection, and in most danger of imperilling her fair fame—the pic-nics, carpet dances, and garden parties—Gladys frequents alone. Lord Mountcarron does not care for such amusements. He is too fat and heavy for lawn tennis and dancing; he dislikes music, and he has no use for flirting, that

is, amongst his equals. His only pleasure consists in frequenting his club—playing at billiards—and consorting with his own sex. He is still the well-appointed, and well-dressed man he was last year. But a great change is visible in him. He has lost the look of eagerness—of expectation—of excitement, which accompanied his pursuit of Gladys, and much of his youth has departed with it. He is not tired of her (or at any rate he would not acknowledge as much). But he has grown accustomed to her. She is no more a novelty to him. She is no longer anything to be excited about—in plain words, *she is his wife*. In this particular, Lord Mountcarron is not unlike other men, but the effects of it are more visible on him. He has not so much as others to fall back upon. He was essentially a "club" man, before he met the lovely Miss Fuller, and was fired into something like social energy by her charms, and now that those charms have become familiar to him, he has returned

to his club life, and leaves Gladys to do just as she likes.

She has every liberty and luxury, as she told her sister, but she has no sympathy and no companionship. She is left to feed on her own heart, and the food is poisoned. What wonder that she droops more and more each day, and seems in danger of becoming callous and hardened? Sometimes she indulges herself by touching on her pain.

Sometimes, and generally unexpectedly, Gladys rushes into Mrs. Prendergast's presence and pours forth an impetuous complaint into her sister's bosom. It is these occasional outbursts that save her heart from breaking. Without them she would despair. But Winnie is wise as well as loving, and she lets her sister talk. She listens patiently to the oft-told catalogue of Jemmie's virtues and graces, to the description of his beauty, to the history of his love for Gladys, and all that they said to one

another. She lets the poor sorrow-laden young heart weep itself dry in her arms.

She never drops a hint that she has heard the tale before. She sympathises and condoles and tries to comfort, but she never preaches nor condemns. She is Gladys' safety valve. She cannot teach her any better means by which to rise above her trouble, but she lets nature have her sway, and probably saves the girl from a brain fever.

But the season is a sad one, nevertheless. Lady Mountcarron tries to conceal her feelings from her father and mother, but they see that she is ill, and they fear she is unhappy.

Yet nothing they can do or say draws the truth from her. At last General Fuller appeals to his son-in-law.

"Mountcarron! I feel uneasy about Gladys! She is certainly not well, although she refuses to acknowledge it. Do you know the cause?"

"*Gladys not well!*" repeats the earl. "You astonish me. We were at the opera last night, and I thought she was looking brilliant."

"You cannot see it when she is under excitement, but if you watch her in the mornings, you will observe how weak and thin she has grown."

"God bless my soul! She'd better have Somerset Fells, or some big wig to see her at once. I can't have her growing thin. Her slightness is her great fault. Who would you recommend me to call in, general?"

"I am not sure that her case requires a doctor, but I think she should have more rest and quiet. She goes out too much. She is never at home, morning, noon or night, and she is not strong enough to stand such a round of gaiety."

"But she likes it," argues Mountcarron. "It is her own wish to go."

"Still it is very bad for her, and I con-

sider her too young to judge for herself. Cannot you persuade her to pass a few evenings at home, Mountcarron?"

"Oh, by Jove, general! *You* have more influence with her than I have. Gladys is not very confidential with me, you know. She has always been somewhat of a 'stand off' nature, and I don't fancy she would care for my interfering with her amusements. Besides, she's only doing what all women in her position do. She must *show* herself, you know."

"She will *kill* herself!" says the general.

Lord Mountcarron laughs heartily at the supposition.

"My dear general, those slight wiry girls will stand twice the fatigue of your rosy plump women. You should have seen Gladys at Carronby! By Jove, didn't she go it! Why, she was always scouring the country, in the saddle or on foot, and that fellow Jem after her. I used to say they'd

kill themselves then, but you see they didn't. Oh, she's got twice the strength you imagine. Still if you think it necessary, let's have a doctor."

"I would rather try recruiting by the sea side after the season is over, Mountcarron? What do you say to letting Gladys come with us to Ryde—that is, if she is willing—when you go to the moors for your grouse shooting this year."

"Delighted, my dear general—delighted to agree to anything that will give you and her pleasure. By all means, let her go to Ryde. It is the very place for her! And you can bring her to Carronby to meet me when I return in September."

This proposition is made to Lady Mountcarron, and gladly acceded to. She is only too pleased (she says) to go with her dear dad anywhere. She feels like his own girl again—(she tells him fondly)—as they walk up and down the pier, on the sea-beach

together—and as if nobody had ever come between them.

It is on one of these occasions, and when Gladys has been unusually affectionate, that her father tries to extract the truth from her about her married life.

"I don't think anybody *has* come between us, my darling," he says tenderly; "and I believe Mountcarron to be too considerate even to wish to do so. He seems to have but one desire, Gladys—that you should be happy and comfortable."

"Yes, dad," she answers indifferently.

"My dearest child," continues the general, pressing her fondly to his side (they are walking up and down a lonely part of the sands at the time) "for you know that you have always been my dearest child to me, I feel very anxious to learn if you are happy in your married life. I know that you have everything you can possibly require that money can procure; but, are you *happy?*

You may remember that I felt nervous at the time of your marriage, and you laughed my fears away! Can you laugh them away now?"

"Certainly I can, father! What I married Mountcarron for, I have obtained. He has fulfilled every promise he made, and he has treated me with uniform kindness. I have no accusation to bring against him in any way. I knew exactly what he was when I became his wife, and he has not altered. I fancy few women can say as much for their husbands."

"Very true, my dear—and yet—your looks do not satisfy me, Gladys."

"Because I'm like a washed-out rag! Mountcarron is not responsible for that, dad. It is all my own fault. I have danced myself into this condition—more fool I for doing it—but I shall be all right, when I have had a few weeks of this delicious sea-air."

"I hope you may, my darling, for I am

uneasy about you. But *why* did you dance yourself ill, Gladys?"

The voice is so tender, the interest so unfeigned, that Gladys is tempted, for a moment, to tell him all. But Love comes to her rescue. In all the world, after her lost lover, she loves her father best, and she cannot make up her mind to plant a thorn in his honest breast. Winnie is different. Winnie is a woman, and knows what a woman sometimes has to bear, but she cannot tell her dad—her darling, patient dad! So she plucks up courage, and answers gaily:

"Haven't I just told you—you deaf old thing? Because I am a fool! I always *was* a fool, dad, dear, though you wouldn't believe it, and never knew when I had had enough of anything! But I will be steadier next season. I shall have sobered down by that time, you know, and people won't tempt me as they did this year. Perhaps even—who knows?—I may have grown too

fat to dance. I believe I shall, if you go on stuffing me as you do now, you dear darling old dad. I'm not worth it, but I love you a thousand times better for it, and you know I do."

"You are worth all the world to me, Gladys," replied her father, simply; "and if you were unhappy, I should feel as if my life were over too."

Still harping on that doubt of her entire happiness. Lady Mountcarron hardly knows how to parry the thrust, but she does (though not quite successfully), not only on that occasion, but on several succeeding ones. She picks up, certainly, in the bracing air of Ryde, and in the company of her parents; and surrounded by their solicitude, she regains a portion of her former content, but still it is a very pale and altered Gladys that General Fuller takes back to Carronby in September, and leaves under the protection of her lawful owner. The house is full of guests,

for the shooting season, and Lady Mountcarron's time is fully occupied with them. She is glad of it. It prevents her paying visits, and there is one visit she dreads to make—a call at Nutley. She hardly knows who *is*, or is *not*, there. For months, she has heard nothing of Lady Renton, or her brother; and Mountcarron has not mentioned their names since her return. But she knows, that, sooner or later, Elinor and she must meet, and Jemmie's name must pass between them—yet she puts off the ordeal from day to day, trusting to gain courage from the delay.

One morning, however, about a week after her return to Carronby, she hears the sound of wheels upon the drive, and looking up, sees Lady Renton's pony-chaise before the door. In a moment, the hot blood has poured into her cheeks. She looks again. Thank Heaven! Elinor is alone, and now, whatever news she brings her, she must school herself to receive it with

a smile. Yet she is as white as ashes when her cousin enters the room. Lady Renton is not entirely at ease, herself. She dreads the meeting almost as much as Gladys. She cannot but suspect that Lady Mountcarron is the object of her brother's passion, and she does not know how far she sympathises with it. She would wish to do her duty to all three of them; to Mountcarron, and Gladys, and Jemmie; but it is very difficult to decide how to do it. She has been thinking all the morning whether she shall introduce her brother's name, or leave Gladys to make the first mention of it. It will seem so strange for her not to go to Carronby laden with the latest news of him. And yet, when she enters the countess's presence, she is tongue-tied. The alteration in Gladys' looks—the sickly smile with which she greets her—the trembling hand extended to take her own, all smite the kindly heart of Elinor Renton with pity,

but tell, at the same time, their own unequivocal tale. She could sit down and cry over the girl, for hours, the traces of her suffering are so visible in her appearance, but she cannot bring herself to introduce the subject of her trouble. And, as for Gladys, she feels as if she could die before she mentioned Jemmie's name. They talk of the season's gaieties, of the weather —the garden, and the shooting; of everything in fact but the man who is uppermost in the thoughts of both. Gladys sits like a guilty creature before Lady Renton, while she inquires absently after everything she cares least about, and blushes like a rose every time that the conversation tends in the slightest degree in Mr. Brooke's direction.

At last Elinor feels she can stand it no longer, and that, for both their sakes, she must make a plunge and introduce the dreaded subject, when Mountcarron comes to her rescue.

He enters his wife's morning room abruptly, with a paper in his hand, but stops short upon the threshold on seeing his cousin.

"Halloa, Elinor! How are you? So glad you've come over. All well at Nutley? And how's Jem? Where is he, and when did you hear from him last?"

He has accomplished in a moment what the two women have been longing to do for an hour. Lady Renton turns to him gladly. She has wanted to speak of her brother in such a way as to persuade Gladys that he is cured of his love for her —a common mode of attempting to medicine the master passion, but a very futile one. For the more a thing seems slipping from our reach, the more we want to grasp it.

"My dear Mountcarron! How well you look. Much better than Gladys, who, I am afraid, has been making too much of her first season. Jemmie is all right, thank

you. When I last heard from him he was in Calcutta."

"*In Calcutta?* By Jove! How did he get out there?"

Lady Mountcarron does not lift her eyes from her lap, where her nervous hands are busily employed in breaking off the *chenille* trimming from her dress. But Lady Renton watches the shaking of those hands, and goes on pitilessly, though with the best intentions.

"He went straight to India from Alexandria, and seems to be delighted with the country, and enjoying himself immensely. It is only natural that he should like to travel and see the world. He has nothing to keep him at home. I suppose you heard of poor Charles Renton's death?"

"I read it in the papers," says Mountcarron.

"Jemmie nursed him to the last like a brother. Wasn't it good of him? But he

is such a kind-hearted boy, and he was glad at that time to get out of England."

"Why was that?"

"Well, Mountcarron, I am not sure that I can tell you, for I do not know the whole story myself, but from what Jemmie told me I imagine he had fallen into some little scrape or other. He seemed vexed with himself, as if he had been betrayed into something foolish, and Jemmie is the kind of boy who would feel a thing of that sort deeply. He would see the folly of it directly he had time to reflect, and would blame himself for having given way to it. All he told me was, that he wanted to leave home for a while, and I sent him to Alexandria, which benefitted him and poor Charlie at the same time."

"A woman at the bottom of it, of course?" says the earl.

Elinor shrugs her shoulders.

"I conclude so. But it's all over now,

whatever it was. Jem is of rather a fickle disposition, you know."

"By Jove! I should think he was. The scores of women that fellow has raved to me about"

"Oh, Mountcarron! be merciful, and make it dozens," cries Lady Renton, laughing. "But he has such a loving way about him with all the fair sex, that I think they sometimes give him credit for a great deal more than he feels."

"How many hearts has he broken in India?"

"I haven't received the list yet. He'll go over it with me, perhaps, when he returns. But a certain Miss Temple figures so prominently in his letters home, that I imagine she must be the reigning favourite."

"When is he coming back?"

At this question Gladys starts, and looks up nervously, which puts Lady Renton on her guard. She is not quite certain what

to say. It is against her principles to tell a direct falsehood, although she has been sailing rather close to the wind once or twice during this conversation, and yet she fears it is inexpedient to let Lady Mountcarron know that Jemmie is expected home soon. So she gains time by asking:

"Do you mean my brother?"

"Naturally! who else could I mean? Is he going to cut the home shooting altogether this season?"

"Oh! I believe so. He has been after big game in India, and writes as if he should despise all other sport henceforward. He is very intimate with the officers of the governor's staff at Calcutta, and has been making up parties with them to go after bears and tigers. He has shot one tiger that measured eleven feet from tip to tail, and seems very proud of his prowess. I am to have the skin for my drawing-room And he has killed several bears and any number of antelopes."

"But when is he coming back to Carronby, Elinor? That is what I want to know. I was always fond of Jem, and I miss the beggar terribly."

"Well! he *talks* of next Christmas, Mountcarron, but you know how uncertain Jem is!"

What a big jump Gladys' heart gives as she hears the word "*Christmas*," and how it sinks again at Lady Renton's subsequent observation.

"You think Miss Temple may detain him!" says the earl, with a grim laugh.

"I think his mind is so unsettled on the subject that a feather's weight may turn the scale either way, and keep him out there till the Christmas after. And he appears to be enjoying himself so much that I have not the heart to influence the dear boy. He has evidently quite got over his little trouble—whatever it may have been—and to have taken out a new

lease of pleasure. Why should I be so selfish as to wish to cut it short?"

"Perhaps he may bring home the fair Miss Temple to you as a sister-in-law."

"I shouldn't be surprised," says Lady Renton laughingly, as if the idea were both pleasant and natural to her. "She is the only daughter of Colonel Temple, who is attached to the governor's staff, and report says a great beauty. If Jemmie wants to marry her I shall be quite satisfied. You know, Mountcarron, that all I desire is, the dear boy's happiness. And it is almost time that he married, is it not?"

"I don't know," grumbles the earl, "I can't fancy Jem as a married man, and I'm afraid it would spoil him as a companion. He won't be allowed to scamper all over the country with you then, Gladys," he continues, turning to his wife, "Mrs. Brooke will be pulling his ears for him if he suggests such a thing."

The glances of both of them are on her.

She feels that she *must* speak. She raises her weary eyes, and says with an affected smile, that is almost ghastly :

"Then you must find me another cousin, Mountcarron, instead of him!"

"By Jove! but I can't, my dear. Jem is the beginning and the end of all my cousins. Don't let him marry, Elinor. There'll be time enough for that when he steps into my title."

"Don't talk nonsense, Mountcarron, and don't grudge my poor Jem the happiness you have secured to yourself." But as Lady Renton finishes this sentence she feels it is rather *mal-à-propos* to one, at least, of her hearers, and tries to cover it with another. "Have you heard that the fair Miss Rusherton is engaged to be married?"

"By Jove! that reminds me," exclaims the earl. "Gladys, I want you to write an invitation to dinner for the Rushertons for next Thursday."

"*The Rushertons*, Mountcarron! But I don't know them."

"That's no reason you shouldn't, and you'll have plenty of time to leave a card upon them between this and Thursday. You needn't go in, you know. It won't be expected of you. Just drive round, and let the servant leave your card at the door."

"But they are not very desirable people, are they?" says Gladys demurringly. "I have heard the mother is so vulgar. And Miss Rusherton bears anything but a nice reputation. I mean she is such a flirt, and so fast. Don't you think so, Elinor?"

"*I* don't like them. I wouldn't ask them to Nutley," says Lady Renton shortly.

"O! that's all nonsense!" exclaims the earl. "You women take prejudices against one another, and then nothing's too bad to say. What's the matter with Miss Rusherton? She's right enough, and a deuced handsome girl into the bargain. And the fact is, I have a matter of business in hand

with her father, and I want to be polite to him."

"Couldn't you ask him here alone then?" enquires Gladys. "It would be nothing out of the way under the circumstances, and the family have never been admitted to Carronby yet."

"Well, it's high time they were then, for old Rusherton is one of the most important men about here, and worth a cool million. It's time we shewed a little civility to our neighbours, Gladys, and we'll begin with the Rushertons. Ask them to dinner on Thursday."

"How many?" demands Lady Mountcarron laconically. She is too indifferent to dispute the matter further.

"The mother, father, and daughter," replies her husband;" and don't forget to call on them first, or they might resent the neglect, and they'll think the world of a visit from you. I shouldn't wonder if the old woman had your card framed and hung

up in the drawing-room." And chuckling over this idea, Mountcarron leaves the ladies to themselves again.

"What *can* he want to ask those people to Carronby for?" says Lady Renton, as soon as his back is turned. "The girl has been educated at a fashionable school, but the parents are exceedingly vulgar. I should have thought the last place Mountcarron would have wished to see them at was his dinner table."

"O! never mind. Let him have his own way. What does it signify?" says Gladys wearily.

"But, my dear girl, you will have to associate with them if they are forced upon you in this manner. You cannot ignore people whom you have entertained at your own table. I wish Mountcarron would reconsider his decision. I am afraid it may result in some awkwardness for you."

"I don't think it will," replies Gladys, in

the same indifferent tone. "I can always say 'Not at home,' when they call."

"But you will meet them out riding most likely. Miss Rusherton is a great horsewoman. She hunts all the season, and you will be unable to shake her off, if she takes a fancy to join you. Those sort of people are always the most presuming."

"I shall not give her the chance," says Gladys, "I am going to give up riding."

"*To give up riding!* This is quite a new idea, is it not? Mountcarron wrote me word he expected you to hunt this season. Why are you going to give it up?"

"I am too weak to ride. The exercise is too much for me," says Gladys.

"I perceive a great alteration in your looks. Have you consulted a doctor?"

"No. There is no necessity. I am not really ill, but I am not strong; and—and—I prefer walking to riding.

"It is a pity," says Lady Renton rising; "but I think when people are not feeling

very well that it is always best to let them have their own way. Well, good-bye, Gladys; and remember, when you have time, I shall be very glad to see you over at Nutley."

"Oh! I shall *not* have time," cries Lady Mountcarron fretfully. "You know the house is full of men, Elinor, and my husband is never satisfied if I am out of the way. You will forgive me, will you not, and come and see me at Carronby instead? I—I—cannot go over to Nutley!"

"Do just as you like, my dear," replies Lady Renton gravely, as she kisses her, and leaves the room.

CHAPTER IX.

"AGNES RUSHERTON."

THIS visit is naturally followed, on the part of Gladys, by a great access of grief. Lady Renton's insinuations have placed Jemmie in entirely a new light before her. She has been mourning their inevitable separation—her own unkindness and want of courage, and her lover's despair. But she never dreamt that he could be unfaithful to her. She believes herself capable of bearing a widowed heart about her for a lifetime for his sake, but to give him up to another woman is simply impossible. She cannot, she will not do it. If she only knew where to address him, Gladys is quite ready at this

juncture to write to Mr. Brooke, and tell him to come back to England and claim her as his own. Her vanity is wounded, as well as her affections. At one time she raves against him for never having loved her; at another she reproaches herself for having driven him to other arms for the consolation she denied him. Her mind becomes a perfect chaos of jealousy, longing, and despair; and she hopes but for one thing—Jemmie's return. If he only reaches England without having compromised himself with that abominable Miss Temple—if she can get speech and hearing of him—all will be right again. Jemmie cannot resist her pleading tears and smiles. She knows him too well; and the only comfort Lady Mountcarron can gather for herself lies in looking forward to the future, and remembering her power over him in the past. Meanwhile she obeys her husband's orders, and calls on the Rushertons, and sends them an invitation to

dinner, which is eagerly accepted. On Thursday they present themselves full half-an-hour before the appointed time, which gains Lady Mountcarron a reproof for not being ready to receive them—Mr. Rusherton looking rather stiff and uncomfortable in his evening suit—his wife, so nervous in the presence of an earl and countess, that it becomes painful to address her—and his daughter, over-dressed, underbred, and rather inclined to be too forward.

Gladys, sitting at the head of her table, in a high black velvet robe, looks a being of a different order from her guests, whom she scarcely knows how to interest or amuse. The old gentleman can only talk crops and stock, and the old lady is too uneasy to talk at all, so that the greater part of the conversation at dinner falls to Lord Mountcarron and Miss Rusherton, who is seated on his left-hand side. Agnes Rusherton is a fine, bold, dashing young woman, of perhaps five or six and twenty. She

has dark hair and eyes, and a brilliant complexion, a splendid figure, and plenty to say for herself. The chief signs of her inferior blood lie in her mouth and hands, both of which are coarse and prominent features in her composition. She feels flattered, as well as her parents, at being invited to dine at Carronby House, but it is not so much of a surprise to her as it is to them.

She has been acquainted with the earl for some time past. They have met in the hunting field and other places, and their knowledge of each other is not a thing of yesterday.

Indeed, there was a time, now faded in the distance, when Miss Rusherton fondly hoped (though quite without reason), that *she* might occupy the place in which Gladys now sits.

The latter is surprised to see how familiar her husband is with Miss Rusherton, and how many topics of interest

they possess in common. Were she attached to the earl, she might feel jealous to find how much she has been kept in the dark concerning this acquaintanceship, but she is too much occupied with her own trouble to do more than think it strange. She takes a violent dislike, however, to the whole family, and is very thankful when the ordeal is over. The hour spent with the ladies in the drawing-room after dinner is a very trying one. Miss Rusherton is forward and pushing, almost rude, indeed, in her way of pressing an unwelcome point, and her mother can say nothing but "Lor'!"

The fair Agnes makes the tour of the two drawing rooms, inspecting and commenting on everything she sees there, and calling on Lady Mountcarron for information concerning them. At last she lights upon a photograph of Jemmie, which has stood there so long that Gladys has not liked to put it out of sight, although she

has done her best to conceal it behind the other ornaments.

"Lor', ma! here's Mr. Brooke!" exclaims Miss Rusherton, as she pounces on it. "Isn't this meant for Mr. Brooke, Lady Mountcarron?"

"I believe so," says Gladys, without turning her head.

"It's not very like him though," continues Agnes, bringing the picture into the front room. "At least, I don't think it flatters him, do you, ma? When was this taken, Lady Mountcarron?"

"I really can't tell you.''

"He's such a good-looking fellow—at least, according to *my* taste, you know, but then ladies differ, and perhaps you don't think the same. Perhaps you prefer dark men to fair ones."

"Yes," says Gladys mendaciously. "I do."

"Well, that's only natural, considering his lordship is dark. But Jem—— I mean

Mr. Brooke—"(There, now! it's just like me, to let my tongue run on in that thoughtless fashion.) "But I hope you'll excuse it, Lady Mountcarron, for we all get so friendly with one another in the hunting-field——"

"Pray don't apologise to me, Miss Rusherton."

"Well, what I was going to say is that Mr. Brooke is quite a different type from his lordship. When is he coming home, Lady Mountcarron?"

"I really cannot tell you," replies Gladys coldly.

"Hasn't he settled yet? How queer! Fancy, ma, Mr. Brooke hasn't settled when he'll come home again."

"Lor!" says Mrs. Rusherton. "And he's been gone now—let me see—why, nearly eight months. I *should* like to know what made he take such a start all of a sudden. There must have been some reason for it."

"There was a very good reason for it,"

replies Gladys indignantly, though she does not let her indignation be seen, "and since you appear so interested in my cousin's affairs, I will tell it you. He left England to nurse a dying relative in the East."

"Oh, I heard that story, too, but I never believed it," exclaims Miss Rusherton, "you might put all that in your eye, and see none the worse, Lady Mountcarron. But I hope it was nothing serious, for I like Mr. Brooke awfully, and I should be sorry to hear he had come to grief."

"I am sure you are *too* good—altogether too good," replies Gladys, with awful sarcasm, as the door opens to admit the gentlemen.

She welcomes her husband's return with avidity.

He flirts all the evening with Miss Rusherton, and he throws her entirely on the vulgar old father and mother for society, but he may do anything he chooses,

so long as he monopolises her tormentor, and keeps the sacred name from being defiled by her lips. But as soon as their guests have departed, Lady Mountcarron expresses herself very strongly concerning them to the earl.

"They are gone, thank Heaven," she exclaims, as the door closes behind them, and I sincerely trust I shall never see them again."

"What do you mean?" asks Mountcarron.

"I mean that they're perfectly detestable, all three of them, and the daughter is the worst of the lot. I never spent such a miserable evening in my life, nor was asked to associate with such vulgar people. If you invite them to the house again, Mountcarron, you must entertain them yourself, for I shall refuse to do so."

The earl is astonished. This is the first time since their marriage that Gladys has ever asserted herself, and he cannot under-

stand it. He looks at her as if she were another woman.

"What on earth has put your back up like this?" he says. "What have they done—or left undone?"

"Everything—especially that horrid girl. They are the most forward, presuming people I ever met in my life. They are not fit associates for me, and I refuse to receive them again."

But at this open rebellion Lord Mountcarron looks grave. He is not a good-*tempered* man. He is only good-*natured*. When things go right, and he has his own way in everything, he is too indolent not to be delighted to leave them alone. But when he is thwarted he can be very nasty. And he feels nasty now. It is he who brought the Rushertons into Carronby House, and he tells himself that he cannot see them insulted. So he assumes a higher tone to Gladys than he has ever used before.

"It is for *me* to decide who you receive or do not receive, my dear," he answers, "and whoever I ask to my house you will be good enough to entertain with the courtesy befitting the rank to which I have raised you."

His words are perfectly polite, but they are very severe.

Gladys bites her lip, and taps her foot upon the floor, as she replies:

"I shall not receive the Rushertons again!"

The earl rises and carefully closes the drawing-room door, which is standing ajar.

"I think we will settle this little matter before we go to bed," he says, quietly, as he reseats himself. "I have dealings with old Rusherton—transactions which concern the stock-farm—which oblige me to be polite to him and to his family."

"That need not necessitate your asking them to dinner," interpolates Lady Mountcarron.

"Will you hear me out, Gladys? It *does* necessitate my keeping on good terms with Mr. Rusherton, and the greatest compliment I can pay him is to ask him (and of course his wife and daughter) to dine at our table."

"And the worst compliment you can pay *me*."

"I really don't see it. I don't pretend they are *crème de la crème*, but they are highly respectable people, and we can do in the country what we cannot afford to do in town. And I'm sure you can have no fault to find with the daughter. She has been educated at a high-class school, and is considered one of the beauties of Sussex. She is a splendid rider—really, to see that girl in the field is a picture—and she is clever, and brilliant, and——"

"I don't care what she is out of doors," cries Gladys impetuously, "she is a fast, presuming creature in the house, and I cannot bear her. Why, she talked to me

as if she had known me all my life. Could anything be in more execrable taste from a woman in her position to one in mine?"

The earl laughs derisively.

"Ah, I see it all now! Your ladyship's pride has been wounded, and you can't forgive it. You expected these people to be at your feet all the evening, and you are indignant to find that they treated you like an equal. And so you *were* their equal before I made you Countess of Mountcarron. You seem to forget that."

"I was *never* their equal," cries Gladys, firing up, "do you mean to tell me that you consider those vulgar old people on a par with my dear father and mother, or that their pushing daughter can compare with me? I have some of the best blood of England running in my veins. I am on equality with any man or woman in the land, although you *do* seem to think so much of the coronet I condescended to accept at your hands."

"You were a commoner before you wore it, all the same," retorts Mountcarron. "Your father ranks amongst the gentry of England, and so does Mr. Rusherton. Education is a mere accident. You all spring from a common stock."

"I think," says Gladys deliberately, and with the most withering accent she can assume, "I think there is no greater vulgarity in the world than to boast of the rank which has come to us by inheritance only. *That* is an accident, if you like, and you cannot bring yourself down to the level of creatures like the Rushertons, better than by talking as if your title set you above *me* or any gentleman of birth. But as you seem to admire them so much, perhaps that is the object you have in view."

Mountcarron looks more puzzled than angry.

"It is very strange," he says, "that you have never attempted to speak to me in

this strain before. What has come over you to-night, Gladys? What is the reason of it all?"

"You have never given me occasion to speak like this before," she answers, "but when I see you degrading yourself, by associating familiarly with such people as these, I consider it is time to speak. Besides, you flirted with that girl all the evening, and you know it."

The earl whistles significantly.

"*That's* where the shoe pinches, is it? I cannot try and make myself agreeable to a lady at my own table, whom you are treating with marked neglect, without incurring the onus of flirting with her. Now, Gladys; I want to put a question to you. Have I ever tried to thwart any wish of yours?"

"I have never said you did."

"That is no answer. Have I ever interfered with your companions or amusements? Have I not let you go about free as air

where you chose and with whom you chose?"

Gladys, recalling her many walks and rides with Jemmie, falters consciously: "*Yes.*"

"Well, why can't you accord me the same liberty? I don't ask you to make a bosom friend of Mrs. Rusherton or her daughter. I don't ask you even to be familiar with them. All I demand for them is a polite reception when they come to my house. And that is what I intend to have."

He speaks with more authority than he has ever done before, and Gladys thinks it prudent to give in to him. Did she love him she would not be so complaisant. But after all (as she says to herself) what does it signify? Mountcarron may control her actions, but not her manner, and it will be easy for her to shew these upstart Rushertons that they are not welcome to the hostess of Carronby. So she answers lightly:

"All right. If you are determined on it, of course it must be! But for Heaven's sake don't inflict me with them oftener than you can possibly help. I feel as if I had had enough of that dreadful old woman to last me a lifetime."

The earl laughs, and says he thinks he has had the same, and the matrimonial storm blows over. The husband and wife both learn something from it, however. Mountcarron, that Gladys can assert her rights where she considers they are invaded, and Gladys, that Mountcarron will have his own way. The discovery makes the one more secretive and the other more amenable. Her decision is, to let him do just as he chooses, so that he does not interfere with her, and his, that he had better display his championship for his friends outside of his own domains. The consequence of which is, that he shews his desire to gratify the Rushertons for the future by dropping in to *their* house, instead

of inviting them to his own, and by being polite to their daughter when he meets her in the hunting-field. Such things, however, cannot be kept quiet in a small place like Carronby, and rumours soon begin to reach the countess' ears, that make them tingle. At first she disregards them as village gossip beneath her notice, although they cause her many a jealous qualm, and make her revenge herself upon the earl by increased coldness and an ominous silence. A wife may not love her husband, she may be untrue to him herself, but she cannot bear to see him openly devoted to another whilst he lingers by her side. It hurts her pride and lowers her dignity. She cannot bear that that other woman shall have it in her power to sneer at her failure to keep her husband faithful. And when the rival is of a class inferior to her own, the pill is still more bitter to swallow. Lady Mountcarron cannot help hearing some of the rumours that fly about Carronby concern-

ing the earl and Agnes Rusherton; they seem to crop up at every turn, but she turns a deaf ear to them, and refuses to believe, even whilst the colour rushes into her face at the idea they may be true. Now someone has met them riding together at some distance from home, or an incautious bachelor blurts out the information that Mountcarron was not in the field on the very day he described to her the excellent run they had had, or she finds out by the merest accident that fruit and flowers have been dispatched from Carronby House to the Rushertons without her knowledge. Still these are all circumstances which may bear their own interpretation, and Gladys is unwilling to believe that her husband can do anything to openly disgrace his standing and his name, until one day, when the bomb explodes at her very feet with a suddenness and a certainty that overwhelms her.

CHAPTER X.

"DISCOVERY."

THE discovery comes about in the most simple manner. Such discoveries generally do. How many lives have been wrecked by the going astray of a letter—a clock that was ten minutes too slow—or an incautious sentence, spoken with doors ajar. It is one morning in the middle of December that Lady Mountcarron perceives a restlessness about her lord that is very unusual to him. He leaves the breakfast table more than once to walk out into the hall and examine the state of the weather, and he appears very anxious to learn how his wife feels, and what she intends to do.

"By Jove!" he says, rubbing his hands,

"it's a splendid day for a gallop. Are you going out, Gladys?"

"Not this morning, I think. Isn't it very cold?"

"Not a bit. It's bright and bracing. It would do you all the good in the world to take a ride or a drive. You should be as much in the open air as possible in such weather as this."

"Perhaps I shall try it in the afternoon."

"But that's the mistake you make. You shouldn't wait till the afternoon. The beauty of the day is over by two. You should take advantage of the morning."

Lady Mountcarron is puzzled to understand her husband's solicitude.

"Do you want to get rid of me?" she asks abruptly.

"That's just like you, Gladys. You are the most ungrateful woman I ever knew. You can never appreciate advice that is given for your good."

"I think few people can. However, we

will let that pass. Is there anything you wish me to do for you?"

Lord Mountcarron's brow brightens.

"Yes, there is! only you frighten a fellow from asking you. I want a note of importance carried to Portsmere, and I thought if you were going that way——"

"I can go that way if you wish it. When will your note be ready?"

"Oh! there's no hurry. I don't want you to start till eleven or so. Shall I order your pony chaise?"

"If you please; I shall be obliged to you," says Gladys, walking out of the room. She feels wearied and heart-sick as she does so. At another time she might have had her suspicions aroused by her husband's conduct, but now she does not take the trouble to consider if it is suspicious or not. What does it signify—what does *anything* signify, now that Jemmie is untrue to her? She has heard nothing further of him since the day that Lady

Renton paid her visit. It is evident he is not coming back to Carronby. *That* Miss Temple has detained him in Calcutta, and is flirting with him, doubtless, in the shameless manner in which she has heard those horrid girls in India *can* flirt. And yet, it is not *her* fault. *She* can know nothing of what has taken place between Mr. Brooke and herself. It is *he* alone who is to blame. *He*, who swore to love her for ever, and pretended to be so much in earnest—it is he alone who deserves her hatred and her contempt. Lady Mountcarron is not in the happiest mood as she gathers up her reins, and touches up her pretty little roans, and makes them fly down the drive, and turn so sharply out of the park gates as nearly to upset a stable lad coming into them. He is but a lad, and the sudden apparition of a lady in a pony chaise, which nearly runs over his toes, frightens him to that degree that he backs into the park palings, and stands up against

them, with his mouth open. Gladys fancies she has hurt him, and reining in her steeds, desires the groom to enquire what is the matter.

"Her ladyship wishes to know if the wheel grazed you?" says the groom. But all the answer he gets is by another question:

"Be that her ladyship?"

"Yes! Are you hurt?"

"No! I hain't hurted, but I've a letter for her." And he produces a small scented note, twisted up in the usual manner.

"The boy is not hurt, my lady," says the servant, returning to Gladys; "he was bringing this note for your ladyship."

She takes the note, and, without examining the address, proceeds to open and peruse it. It contains but these words, written in a female hand: "*Thursday, eleven, M.D.*" Lady Mountcarron sees at a glance it is not intended for her. She looks for the direction. It is to the Right Honourable

the Earl of Mountcarron. Her ladyship bites her lips, as she twists up the paper into its original form.

"It is for his lordship—not for me," she says carelessly, returning it to the servant. "Tell the boy to take it up to the house." And then she lays the lash about her ponies' flanks again and sends them spinning along the road.

"I beg your pardon, my lady," says the groom presently, leaning forward, "but your ladyship has passed the turning for Portsmere. We are on the Nutley road, my lady."

"I know it! I have changed my mind," replies Lady Mountcarron.

She is as certain that the note she intercepted is from Agnes Rusherton as if she had seen her write it, and the idea makes her blood boil with indignation. She has borne a great deal, she tells herself. She has put up with the village gossip, and taken no notice of the rumours brought

her by kind friends, about her husband's intimacy with Miss Rusherton. But *this* is a little too much. She will not have the scandal brought under her very nose, nor permit letters of assignation to be carried backwards and forwards to Carronby House with the chance of being read by every servant who takes the trouble to open them. She sees now the reason why Mountcarron was so anxious to get her out of the way—why she was dispatched to Portsmere, a village six miles off, under pretence of making the most of the bright weather, but, in reality, to allow her husband the time and opportunity to visit his inamorata. But she won't do it—says Gladys, indignantly to herself. She will not be made a cat's-paw of. She will go to Elinor and tell her all about it, and ask her advice how to act in the matter.

Gladys does not know how she comes to think of Lady Renton in this extremity; she has never appealed to her before for

counsel in her domestic difficulties. But she wants to hear a woman's view of the business, and she knows Elinor to be perfectly trustworthy and capable moreover of delivering a sound judgment. So she drives as fast as she can to Nutley, and turns with alacrity into the familiar gates. But as she enters the gravelled drive—a much narrower and shorter drive than the one to Carronby House—she perceives another vehicle standing before the front door. Not a private carriage, but a hired coach—on the top of which are two leather portmanteaux—whilst the driver is even then preparing to descend from his box and help the servant to carry them into the house. Gladys' heart stands still. She reins in her ponies suddenly, and addresses a gardener, sweeping away the dead leaves, in a scared and frightened voice :

"What is that, gardener? Who has arrived?"

"Mr. Brooke, my lady," replies the

man, touching his shady hat. "He be just arrived from furrin parts! He's not been passed here a minute, my lady."

Gladys gives a tremendous tug to her reins that sends the ponies rearing on their haunches. The groom is at their heads in a moment.

"Stand out of the way! Let me turn them round," she cries imperiously.

"You can't turn them here my lady; there isn't room for it. You must drive past the house, my lady, and out of the other gate," says the man in a voice of alarm.

"Let go their heads, I say! I shall turn them here," exclaims the countess, as she suits the action to the word. The two men jump out of the way—the ponies chafe and champ—the hind wheel of the phaeton gets into a ditch, whence it is rescued by the superhuman efforts of the groom, and then her ladyship goes plunging through a clump of American shrubs, which she

seriously injures, and is once more in the open road, with her servant behind her wondering what stuff countesses are made of.

Gladys almost wonders herself as she goes spinning back to Carrouby. She is quite unaware *how* she got out of that drive, and that ditch, and those bushes; all she thanks Heaven for is that she *did* get out of them, and saved herself from the ignominy of driving up to Mr. Brooke's house at the very moment of his return. She forgets the earl and Miss Rusherton, and everything else, in the terrible excitement of this meeting. She feels as if she had just escaped from some great danger—some agonising death. And yet, through all the sensation of relief, there is the glad pæan ringing in her heart, "He has come back again."

Whatever may happen in the future—however he may have pledged and bound himself to return—for the present he

is here—close to her—and alone. She shall see him—she shall see her Jemmie again, and when he sees her all *must* be right. He cannot resist her tears—he will be melted by her misery. He will take her to his heart, and the wretched past will vanish like a dream. Why did she run away at the sight of him? Why had she not the courage to drive straight up to the house, and greet him as a cousin should do?

What must the servants think of her extraordinary behaviour? Will they comment on it, and trace it to its true source? All these thoughts flit through the countess' brain until she feels almost beside herself with mingled joy, and shame, and fear.

Her poor little steeds are made to feel the variations of her temperament so plainly that they become rather unmanageable, and the groom has to descend again and soothe them. Lady Mount-

carron becomes impatient. She tosses the reins down and leaves her seat.

"Take them home, William," she says, "I am tired of driving to-day. I shall walk back through the park."

The servant obeys orders, and Gladys is left to herself. This is just what she desires.

Her mind is in too perturbed and perplexed a condition for the society of anything—even two ponies and a groom. It is full of Jemmie—nothing in heaven or on earth but Jemmie. And she thinks she would like to go and work off the terrible excitement under which she is labouring by looking at Moonlight Dell. Moonlight Dell—where he kissed her—first confessed he loved her. Moonlight Dell—where he parted from her, and left her to a life of agony and remorse. Oh! if she can only stand once more with Jemmie in Moonlight Dell, and look up in his dear eyes, and tell him of all the pain which she

has suffered on his account. Gladys feels sure —*quite* sure—that they will cement their love anew over the anguish of the past. It is of no use fighting against her feelings any more. She has tried it and failed; and therefore it is not at all likely that Jemmie shall have succeeded.

The task is too hard for them. They cannot live asunder. They must build up a sweeter friendship for themselves than heretofore. And full of such thoughts as these, with her eyes beaming and her cheeks glowing with anticipation, Gladys toils up the hill that leads to Moonlight Dell. She looks down the slope towards the sullen pool of water. Its borders are already occupied by two figures, pacing up and down—two figures, so much occupied with one another, as to be unaware of her approach—the figures of Miss Rusherton and Lord Mountcarron.

Gladys regards them for a moment in

silent dismay. Then, with a heart swelling with a sense of injury and wounded pride, she turns swiftly back again, and gains the house by a less frequented and more circuitous way.

END OF VOLUME II.